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Photo: Stephen Stickler; Kitana Baker's Make-up & Hair: Delta

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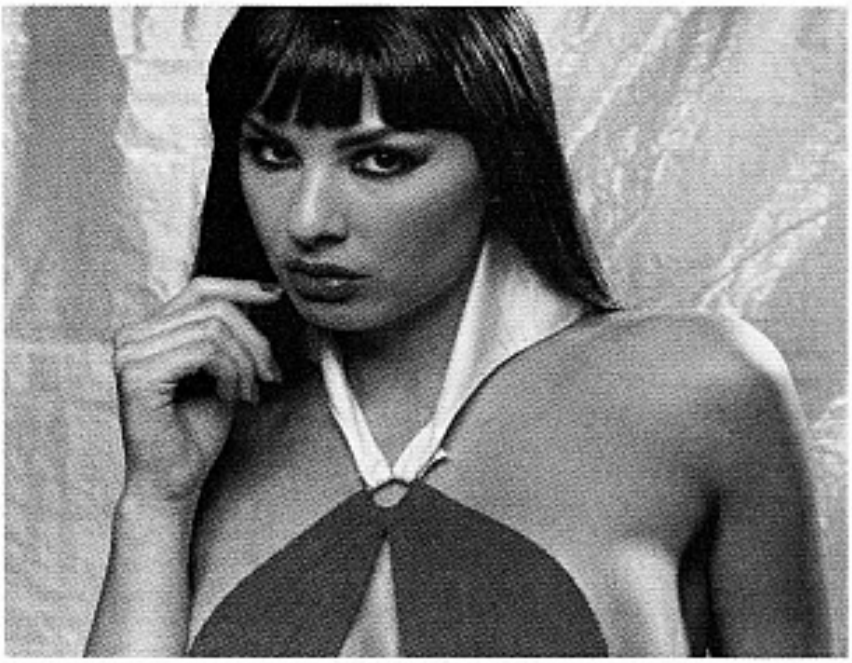
VAMPED



Planning is underway for a Dracula theme park in Romania.

Now, I know what you're going to say: "Wha–?!" The original site was to be in Transylvania, but the nearby town (Sighisoara) is a World Heritage Site and so the project was upped and moved closer to Bucharest.

The planned park features fictional vampire themes, but also some local history as Vlad the Impaler, who is seen as the inspiration for Bram Stoker's Dracula, was born in Sighisoara.

And what does this all mean? Well, for Romania, it could be a huge boost in tourism that the former Communist country needs. But what it really shows is that there is such a love and acceptance of the vampire myth in modern culture that people feel a theme park is needed.

Well, sure; why not? There are parks based on a mouse.

Welcome to the second issue of VAMPIRELLA COMICS MAGAZINE, the horror mag that's slinking into your subconscious. We love our scary stuff. It's everywhere, from movies, to books, to TV (Hey, there's a 24-hour Horror Channel in the works), to every little nook and cranny of life.

What makes you scared? Is it the thing under the bed? Or the shadows that seem to move the wrong way? Are you afraid of the dark? Or what's in the dark? Fear and horror are a part of every day, as if it were a normal Tuesday when everything decided to be un-normal.

Un-normal isn't a real word! See?! Scary!

But horror can be sexy as well as scary. There seems to be an inordinate amount of romance novels that have vampires as main characters. We all know there's something sexy about them! But werewolves and shapechangers (get in touch with your animal side, perhaps?), demons and inter-dimensional travelers all get their time in the spotlight. With the right setting, a scientist working late in a lab can be dripping in sexuality. It's all there for the taking, the playing, the embracing. Amazing, how things that could easily scare us can just as easily titillate us. The dark side of things is just life with the lights out. Why do we so enjoy being scared? The racing heart, the jump, the blood pumping – it's all a part of so many other things, of walking across a busy street, of sex, of going someplace and doing something new. Fear makes us feel alive. And yet nothing scares us more than death.

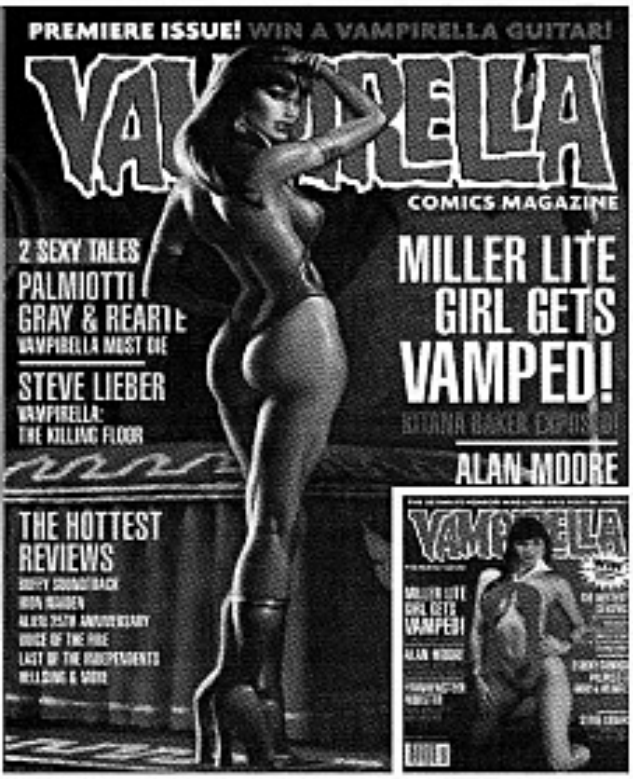
So, live a little and join us for the continuing horrific fun of VAMPIRELLA COMICS MAGAZINE. I'm sure, it'll be a scream!

Vampirella

VAMPIRELLA & Maureen McTigue
Editor-in-Chief

SCARLET LETTERS

titilating tomes



Prior to the release of issue 1, *Entertainment Weekly* reviewed us, giving VAMPIRELLA COMICS MAGAZINE a B-. Not too shabby for the first time out of the box. We hope to keep moving forward and give ourselves a "Greatly Improved A" in due time.

Special thanks and shout outs to Scott Allie, Chris Staros, Mark Wheatley, Batton Lash and Matt Brady and all the others in the comics industry for their words of congratulations on the first issue. Thanks guys!

DEAR MAUREEN MCTIGUE,

Thank you.

I'm happy to hold VAMPIRELLA COMICS MAGAZINE #1 in my hands. Really cool.

I live in Ostfriesland, Germany. Since the early 70s, I've loved Vampirella! But Germany was horrible for her (70s: 15 issues, then the lawgiver decided "Jugendgefaehrdende Schriften!", 80s: eight issues; 90s 17 issues). Since then, I've ordered US comics. And now, VAMPIRELLA goes magazine. Wow.

I love issue #1.

Alles Liebe, alles Gute, ciao.

Erich

Erich,

It's our pleasure!

And thanks for the opportunity to brush up on my High School German classes.

HELLO,

Found the new Vampi magazine recently, and enjoyed it a lot. Makes me feel like I'm back in the old "Warren" days again. The B&W story had the feel of one of those Vintage tales. Gabriel Rearte's art is tremendous. Don't let him get away! Kitana Baker may be the best looking Vampi-girl yet. How about a flashback to Barbara Leigh? I think she was the first girl to model in Vampi's costume in the late 70s.

Also, for future features, how about a Vampirella collectibles section? There are many model kits on her. Readers could send in pics of them. Also, obscure Vampi collectibles like the short series of paperback books on her in the 70s.

Keep up the great work.

Best wishes,

Greg Sisk

Greg,

Thanks for the note! Some great suggestions in there and some things we're already talking about. Stick with us and see what turns up!

"I LOVE ISSUE #1!"

FROM OUR CONTRIBUTORS:

Writing is second nature for **Jim Catapano**, and his first novel proves that. *A Stirring of Shadows*, released this fall, strings together a tale of a dimension between Heaven and Hell, demons bent on world domination, a rag tag bunch of heroes, personal sacrifice for the greater good, and a dog and a duck. *A Stirring of Shadows* is available from www.publishamerica.com or by calling 240-529-1031

Not only can he design a story, host a website, and write a review, but **Jason Brightman** writes and draws his own comic book, *Frayed Ends*. The entire four-issue series is now available through fine comic shops everywhere or through www.frayedends.com. A tale of mixed emotions, realizations, and imaginary friends coming back, *Frayed Ends* has a little something for everyone.

Last month's black & white Vampirella tale was created by **Steve Lieber**, an award-winning artist, who has worked on characters across the comics gamut, including Hawkman and Batman. His present work can be found in *On the Road To Perdition Book Two: Sanctuary*, a sequel to the graphic novel which inspired the Academy Award nominated movie. Check out his own www.unrewarding.com for more.

Jimmy Palmiotti & **Justin Gray** co-write *21 Down* and *Monolith*, as well as working on their own projects. Jimmy's inking work can be found in almost every nook and cranny of comics, and Justin has begun to infiltrate on his own, as you can see in our New Blood section this month. For more about both creators, visit www.paperfilms.com.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Route 666: A hellish road can lead you anywhere, and Tony Bedard and Karl Moline have the map. CrossGen Comics.

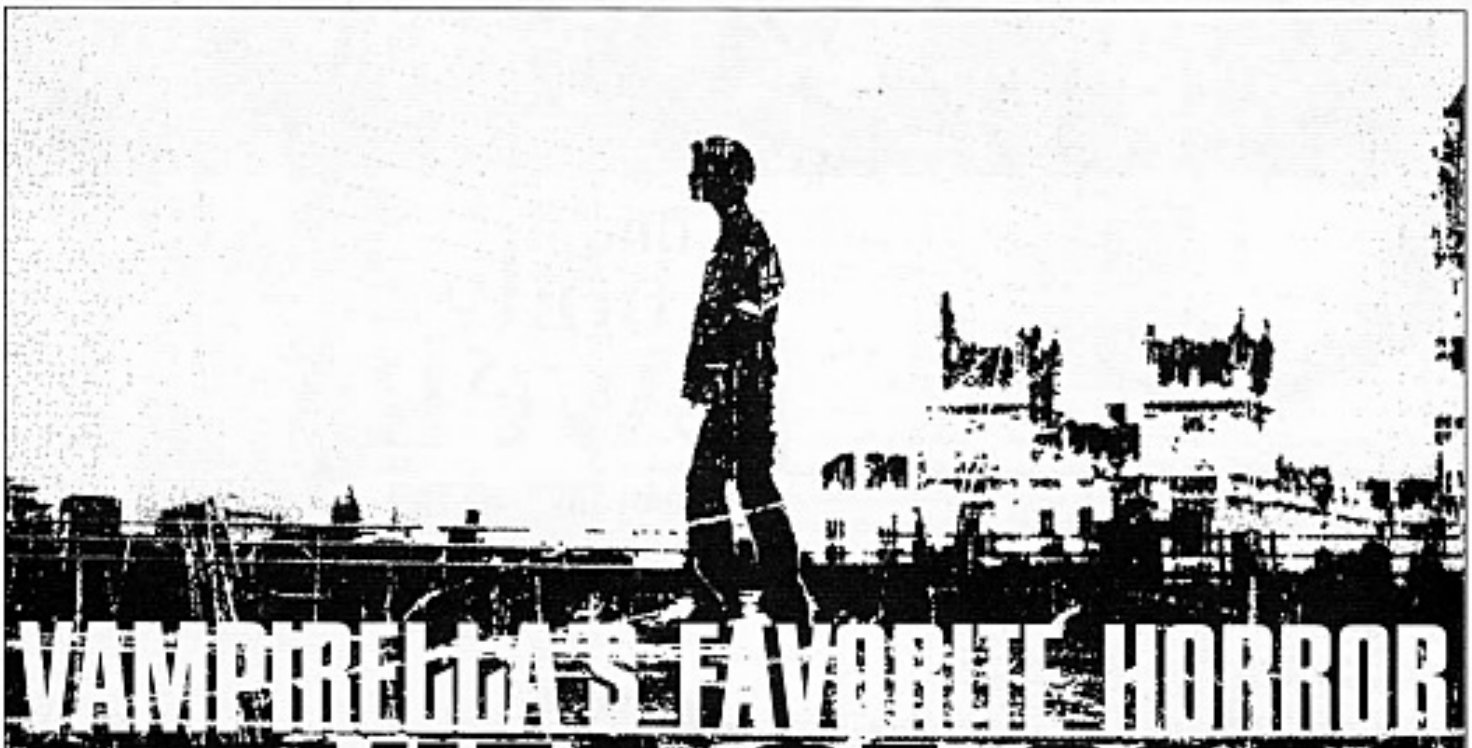
Jingle Belle: Dash Away All: The Blizzard Wizard puts the kebosh on Santa and crew just in time for Christmas. It's up to the younger Clause, Jingle, and a bunch of Arctic outcasts to fly to the top of porch, to the top of the wall! Paul Dini and Jose Garibaldi wrap this one up for Oni Press.

The Mirror of Love: Alan Moore's poetic response to a political move. Exploring the history of gay relationships. Not for everyone, but definitely something to ponder. Top Shelf Productions.

Goats: A web-strip found at the aptly titled www.goats.com has a bit of everything: a demonic chicken, a busy bar, aliens, an immortal goldfish, aliens, crazed relationships, and, of course, a goat. Funny stuff for those with a wicked sense of humor.

Looking for comics related material? Call 1-888-COMIC BOOK or check out www.the-master-list.com for a comics specialty store near you. Many bookstores also carry a wide array of graphic novels.

SCARLET LETTERS, VAMPIRELLA COMICS MAGAZINE, 1115 BROADWAY 8TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10010, OR VIA E-MAIL AT COMICS@HARRIS-PUB.COM



VAMPIRELLA'S FAVORITE HORROR MOVIES OF 2003

There were so many movies of the horror ilk this year that it just warms me to the cockles of my hammering heart. Who would have thought that after years of war blockbusters, silly romance diatribes and big men with big guns that one of the purest cinema forms would make such a huge comeback?! Please, you don't think of horror when you think of movies? Ha! Thomas Edison made a Frankenstein movie. Take that, movie snobs. And yes, there were dozens of other blood-fest flicks this year, but these are the ones held dearest.

28 DAY LATER: Yum! Zombies! Really, that's what they are, no matter if they want to eat brains or not.

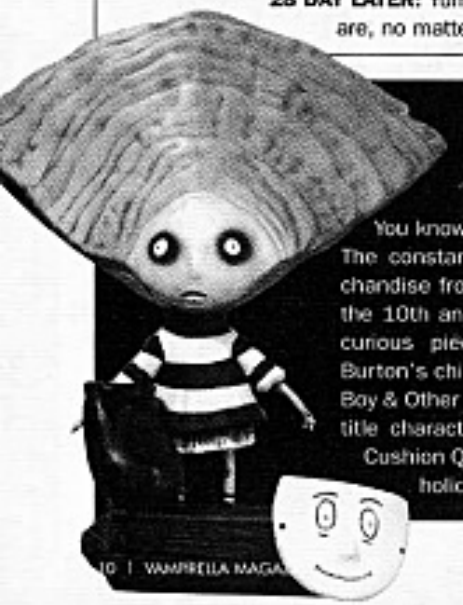
FREDDY VS. JASON:
Oh come on, how can I not love this?! They are the kings of horror.

KILL BILL VOL 1:
The high blood quotient makes my mouth water for Volume 2!

GIGLI:
Just the thought of it still gives me chills.

BUBBA HO-TEP:
I loves me my Bruce Campbell!

THE EYE:
Good, creepy, suspenseful horror. The way it was meant to be.



UNDER THE SEA

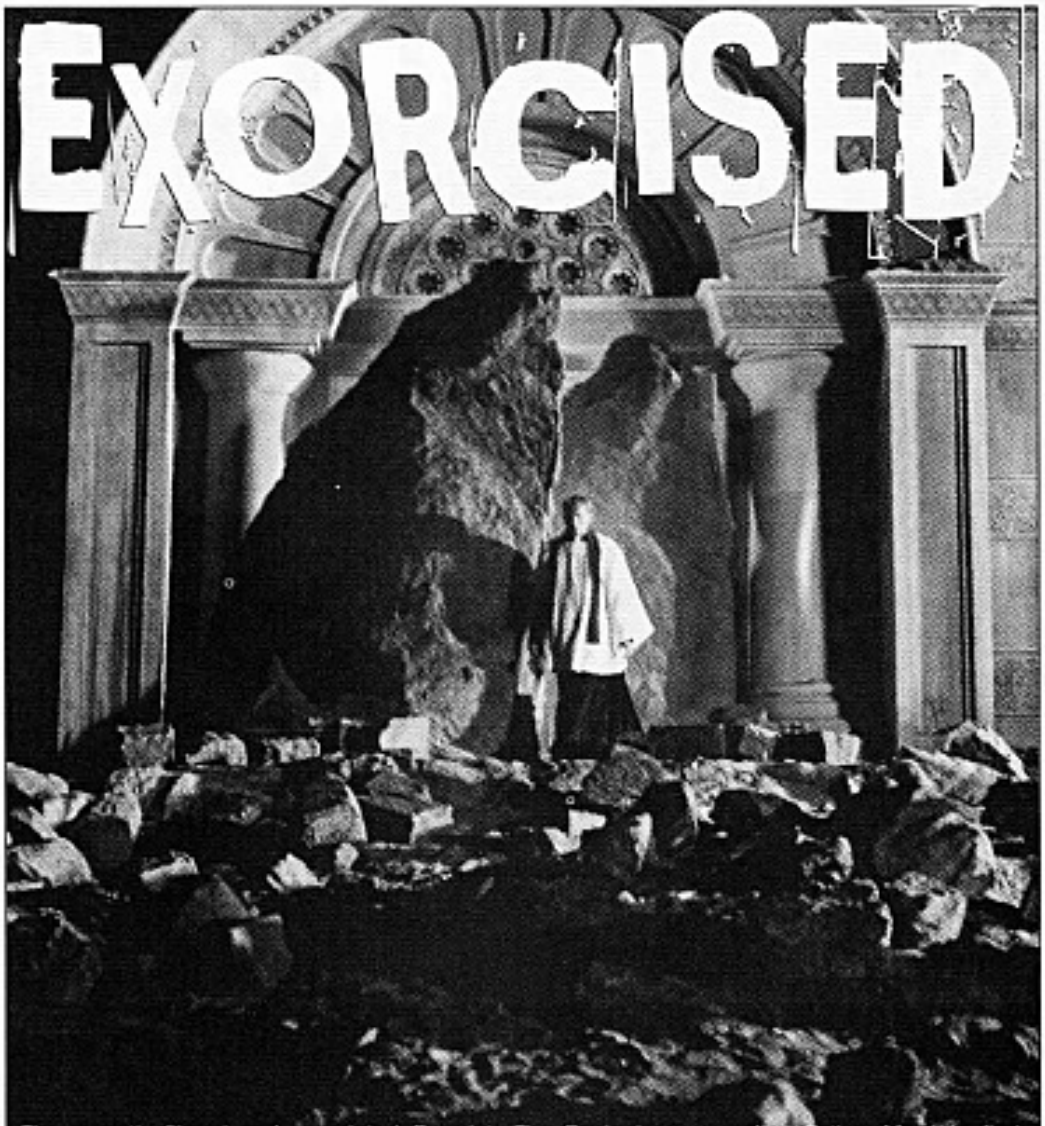
You know you can never get enough Tim Burton. The constant flow of Nightmare before Christmas merchandise from both Disney and NECO, especially now for the 10th anniversary, is proof of that belief, as are the curious pieces from Dark Horse Comics. Based on Burton's children's book, The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy & Other Stories, Tragic Toys for Boys & Girls offers the title character as well as Stain Boy, Toxic Boy and Pin Cushion Queen and others. How great are these for the holidays?

And if that wasn't enough Tim Burton (and it never is), make sure you check out the release of Big Fish (limited release December 2003; wide release January 2004). A tale of a father's life told to his son, Big Fish stars Ewan McGregor and Albert Finney. For added interest, comics artist Dawn Brown (Little Red Hot, Vampirella) worked as a set designer on the film, which has the expected and distinct Burton look.

Big Fish and Oyster Boys... looks like someone's got a penchant for seafood.

28 Days Later ™ & © Fox; Oyster Boy © Tim Burton; Exorcist ™ Warner Bros.; Television art by Jay Stephens, produced by Penlight
Ent. for Discovery Kids; I am Legend © 1954, renewed 1982 Richard Matheson. Art © 1991 by Elmer Brown

EXORCISED



The recently filmed and completed Exorcist: The Beginnings, revealing Father Merrin's first encounter with the devil that would haunt him to his death in The Exorcist was shelved and scrapped, reportedly due to Warner Bros. being surprised at how little blood and gore the psychological horror film had. Director Paul Schrader was removed from the film after the studio screening and new helmer Renny Harlin, known best for Deep Blue Sea, enters the tomb to see what he can piece together. The original February 2004 release has been pushed back to April or May. (Oh, and don't expect to see this image in the new version.)

TUT, TUT

On the small screen, the dead walk again – and teach a little something – in the animated series Tutenstein raised from the mind of comics creator Jay Stephens (Jetcat). In this Discovery Kids series on NBC, Tutenstein, once a pampered young Egyptian prince, awakens in the International Museum of World History 3000 years after his time and realizes that the world is a very different place. Combining real Egyptology with cartoon antics (like arms falling off), Tutenstein airs Saturday mornings. Check local listings.

LEGENDARY TALE

Acclaimed horror comics writer Steve Niles adapts Richard Matheson's famous *I Am Legend*, out now from IDW Publishing.

Matheson is one of those writers whose skills defy genre typecasting. He spoke of alienation and fear in a context that was palatable for the masses. Even when he wrote for TV (*The Twilight Zone*, *Star Trek*), his stories possessed a depth that many of his contemporaries lacked.

Niles' adaptation is visually stimulating. The rough, stylistic art by Elman Brown adds layers to the horror that is Robert Neville's world: as far as Neville is concerned, he is the last uninfected man on earth. By day, Neville reinforces his house and, by night, tries to ignore the vampires who are outside taunting him.

I Am Legend is a sad tale about never-ending struggle and lost hope, about the difference between man and monster, where one ends and one begins, and it is a story that must be read.

VAMP HUNT

When the credits came up on the final episode of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* last spring, ending the series not with a bang but a shrug, some viewers were secure in the knowledge that there was another, arguably better Slayer out there to protect and entertain them. In fact, Anita Blake, the hero of Laurell K. Hamilton's acclaimed novel series published by Berkeley Books, has been dealing with the undead since Buffy was merely a camp character in an overlooked film. Commencing with *Guilty Pleasures* in 1993, the enigmatic Anita has disposed of the undead, although, like her TV counterpart, she sometimes aids them, and yes, dates them too, with typically complicated results.

Anita's world is incredibly multifarious. It is a place where Vampire Hunters are licensed, allied with the police, and need a court order to execute vampires, who have been declared to be U.S. Citizens. Despite this, the body count is huge for humans and otherwise. It is a world that is truly grey, and the baddies are not dispensed with a quip and a stake after 60 minutes. Anita is covered with scars, both physical and emotional, but she keeps coming. Diminutive, dark-haired and detached, Anita is a self-actualized, modern anti-hero, and Hamilton consistently puts her in situations that reveal more about her character, while inspiring more questions. And at the end of every blood-soaked day, she has a gun behind her pillow and a stuffed penguin in her arms. How's that for duality?

One of the most popular characters is Jean-Claude, eventual master of the city and paramour to Anita. Deemed one of the sexiest vampires this side of Lestat, Jean-Claude's essence permeates every page of every book, as he haunts and seduces Anita, his "*ma petite.*" With every appearance, Hamilton seems to describes him more vividly and exotically.

Along the way Anita battles a universe of terrors, dealing with horrors gruesome and gory and not for the squeamish. The description of what becomes of the various murder victims is consistently gory, particularly in *The Laughing Corpse*, the second novel. Besides vampires, Anita deals with werewolves, wererats, wereleapords (pretty much were-everything). She also has to contend with more benign horrors like Burt, her boss in her day job as an "Animator"— she resurrects zombies for the purpose of solving crimes or legal matters. But Anita famously gets little time to rest or play, as she is constantly on call with her police liaison Dolph to solve murders and deal with rogue paranormals. Then there's her entertaining love triangle with Jean-Claude and Richard, a werewolf who tries very hard not to sprout fur in front of her—Anita's encounters with them have a way of being erotically charged even when no actual activity takes place.

The novels are as addictive as Jean-Claude himself and begging to be put on film. It all begins with *Guilty Pleasures* and continues through 2003's*Cerulean Sins*, the 11th and most recent installment. — Jim Catapano

RE DARKO?

It has achieved cult standing and it may actually receive the re-release treatment: Donnie Darko, the time-stream movie with a bunny mask, may be re-released by Newmarket Films if writer/director Richard Kelly has his way. According to coverage on the website Ain't it Cool News, Kelly notes that in October he has been in discussion with Newmarket, the films original distributor, to put out a director's cut on the big screen. This release would support the American release of The Donnie Darko Book written by Kelly and published by Faber & Faber. A toy deal with McFarlane Toys is also in the works. The life-after-theatrical release that DVDs give to smaller films is phenomenal and Donnie Darko is certainly reaping the benefits.

Cerulean Sins ™ Laurell K. Hamilton; Donnie Darko ™ & © Fox

Say the name "Moore" in reference to comics and chances are most people will assume you're speaking of a certain bushy-bearded Brit. There is in fact another gentleman in the field with that surname however – and he hasn't done too bad for himself either.

Stuart Moore may be familiar to some for his time as a DC editor, where he co-founded the Vertigo and Helix imprints. At Marvel, he edited the Marvel Knights line for a few years. Now, Moore's cementing his place in the industry – this time as a writer. He's released his science fiction Western, *Lone*, for Dark Horse's Rocket Comics, as well as *Giant Robot Warriors* for AIT/Planet Lar and *Para* for Penny-Farthing Press. With all this going on, he still found time to tolerate this interview's questions – even the annoying ones he's heard a thousand times.

VAMPIRELLA MAGAZINE: So the teacher has just called you up to the front of the classroom and says, "Stuart, tell us how you spent your summer vacation?" Don't worry, You're not graded on your response.

STUART MOORE: Writing, writing, hot, hot, talking on phone, writing, writing, SAN DIEGO!, writing, talking on phone, achoo, writing, rain rain rain, writing.

V: Good answer. I will grade you anyway, but I'm taking points off because you reminded me how crappy the weather was this summer. Anyway, tell me about your *Giant Robot Warriors*.

SM: *Giant Robot Warriors* is something you don't see too often in comics – kind of a combination political satire and romantic comedy.

V: Giant robots and politics? Sounds like Voltron meets "The West Wing."

SM: That's our cover blurb. Thanks!

It all came together terribly easily, and it felt very natural to write. It's about the U.S. Department of Giant Robot Warriors, which is hurriedly called to spring into action when a small Middle Eastern country suddenly achieves Giant Robot technology. I wrote it last year, which is probably good, because it has a light touch that I don't think I could manage in this polarized political climate. It's got lots of cheap jokes and goofy dialogue, and a hero named Rufus Hirohito.

V: I've seen a few comics recently trying to make "political statements". Do you think that's a wise move of some of these writers? Do you think the politics of today and comics can – or even should – mix?

SM: Well, comics is a medium like any other, so yes, of course it should deal with politics if that's a concern of the writer and if it fits into a particular story. I think it's very important for art today to confront what's going on at the highest levels of this country, because it's frankly shameful and horrible and the news media is only just now waking up and starting to deal with it.

That said, *Giant Robot Warriors* isn't a screed -- it's an adventure story and a love story with a satirical political backdrop. Though within the story, there *is* something very wrong with the President...

V: Are the robots sentient, ala *Transformers*? Or are we talking human-commanded *Robotech* kind of automatons?

SM: They're human-commanded – combat machines, basically. I don't want to kill sales or anything, but the book is really much more about humans than robots.

V: Who's the artist on *Robts*?

SM: Ryan Kelly. He's an amazing talent I've worked with off and on; he's co-artist with Peter Gross on Vertigo's *Lucifer*. He drew every ridiculous thing I asked for and more; he really made the characters come alive, and his robots are both powerful and funky and very different from each other.

V: Is this your first attempt at writing humor? Is satire something you'd like to do more of?

SM: The Vampirella story in this issue isn't exactly dead serious.

V: Good point. I understand you've managed to bridge the gap between the blood-feasting undead and rap. Uh, congratulations?

SM: Thanks. Somebody had to do it.

When I was a book editor, I used to do raps at sales conferences (which are pretty dreary, sleepy affairs), for the sales reps. So, this was a way of reconnecting with my embarrassing, wannabe, white-boy roots.

So yes, I like writing humor. Generally, if you write fully-rounded characters, some of them are humorous part of the time anyway.

V: Let's talk about *Lone*.

SM: *Lone* is first and foremost an action/adventure series about a retired (futuristic) gunslinger who comes out of retirement for his own reasons. It's got zombies, coyotes, mutants, and a guy named Easy John who runs a gigantic "fireworks shack." As the series goes on, you learn where Lone came from, and the layers to the story become clearer.

V: Is the comic's namesake more Eastwood, Cooper, Wayne, or just his own man?

SM: More Eastwood, but [artist] Jerome Opeña's drawn him with this great almost-slacker slouch. Like he doesn't even need to stand up straight because everybody knows he's the toughest guy in the room.

V: Jerome just picked up the Russ Manning Most Promising Newcomer award, didn't he? How has it been working with him?

SM: I've really only spoken to him at the San Diego convention – he's a great guy, very serious about his work. Working with him is amazing; he's one of those artists you ask for *anything* – a high-tech lab, a quiet moment between a brother and sister, a gunslinger snapping a zombie's neck – and it comes back perfectly.

V: Comics with Western themes seem to be making a bit of a comeback aren't they? Garth Ennis dusted the genre off with *Preacher*, Ron Zimmerman's *Rawhide Kid* had folks either laughing or cringing, and now DC's resurrected *Cinnamon*. Do you think *Lone* can find a niche?

SM: I wouldn't stand in his way. Seriously, it's down to the individual books. Crime comics are now an actual genre because a handful of incredibly talented guys – Frank Miller, Brian Bendis, David Lapham, Greg Rucka, Brian Azzarello – put out great books on a regular basis. If the same thing happens to western comics, or science fiction, you'll see the same

COMICS WORK BEST WHEN THEIR CONTENT IS IN SYNCH WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD.

phenomenon. I think *Lone*'s a good book – Jerome's incredible art certainly helps.

V: Most of the western comics seem to have a spin on them, though. *Lone* is post-apocalyptic. *Cinnamon* places the character in modern day. Do you think a basic Western story could work or do fans need that "extra something" to keep them interested?

SM: Again, I think it depends on the book. The science-fiction setting of *Lone* lets us play around with what it means to be a loner, to make your own law and to have horrible things done to you, in a different way than a straight, period western would. I'm a science-fiction kind of guy, so it's great fun for me.

V: Are you a fan of the Western genre yourself? Were you "gun slinging" as a kid while others had towel-capes pinned to their t-shirts?

SM: I edited the Joe Lansdale/Tim Truman *Jonah Hex* books at DC; those are great, and so are the original stories. When I was starting work on *Lone*, I saw *Once Upon a Time in the West* for the first time — amazing film. *Unforgiven*'s terrific. As for when I was younger, I was firing off rayguns and traveling through time. I'm a born-again Western fan – I hated them as a kid.

V: Now besides *Lone* and *Giant Robot Warriors*, you've also got *Para* coming up, right? What can you tell us about it?

SM: *Para* is a book that's very close to my heart. It's the story of one woman whose father supposedly died in a particle accelerator accident when she was a little girl and her quest to find out what really happened to him. It's a mixture of nuclear-physics, science-fiction and paranormal stuff. My father was a nuclear physicist and he used to show me all the big magnetic equipment and gigantic circular cyclotron tracks and everything. This is a fantastic version of that, but based in real science. *Para* is being drawn by a very talented young artist named Pablo Villalobos. It's a six-issue miniseries, and will be published by Penny-Farthing Press starting in January or February. People should really check out Penny-Farthing's stuff, including my own *Zendra*. They take a lot of care with the material – it looks first-rate, and they're great to work with.

RYAN KELLY DREW EVERY RIDICULOUS THING I ASKED FOR AND MORE

V: I'm thumbing through *Zendra*. Is it me, or is villain Abathor jonesing for entry into the "Thanos fan club?"

SM: The core *Zendra* characters were created by the artists. I've never asked them about it, but I suspect Abathor was inspired by Thanos, who was probably inspired by Darkseid. To me, Abathor was the old warrior who'd lived on hatred all his life and had nothing to really keep him going anymore... till Halle, our heroine, showed up. I saw him more as tired of life than obsessed with death.

V: What other influences can you attribute your work on *Zendra*?

SM: The first *Zendra* miniseries, collected as *Zendra: Collocation*, was a fast-moving, rip-roaring space opera with various allusions to old science-fiction series. With the second one, *Heart of Fire*, I tried to get more into what it was like to be an adolescent with all these fiery, often destructive emotions roiling inside of you. Symbolically, the first series is about the Zendrans' childhood and the second is about their coming of age. The third, if we get there, will see them coming into their own as adults, and taking the battle to their enemies instead of sitting around waiting to be attacked.

V: Were there ever any creative difference issues with the artists on where the story should go?

SM: The first *Zendra* had a rough outline when I came onboard. I restructured parts, added characters, and changed the original ending to a different, two-part conclusion. I only dealt with Martin and J.C. occasionally; most everything was handled through Penny-Farthing. The second miniseries' story was all mine; I proposed it to Penny-Farthing and they liked it. It's been a very smooth and satisfying collaboration all around.

V: Your books aren't the only writing you've been doing. There's also *A Thousand Flowers*, your online opinion column. Where did the idea for it bloom from (Did that bad pun just hurt)?

SM: It's kind of a thorn in my side, yes. Maybe you can prune it out later on.

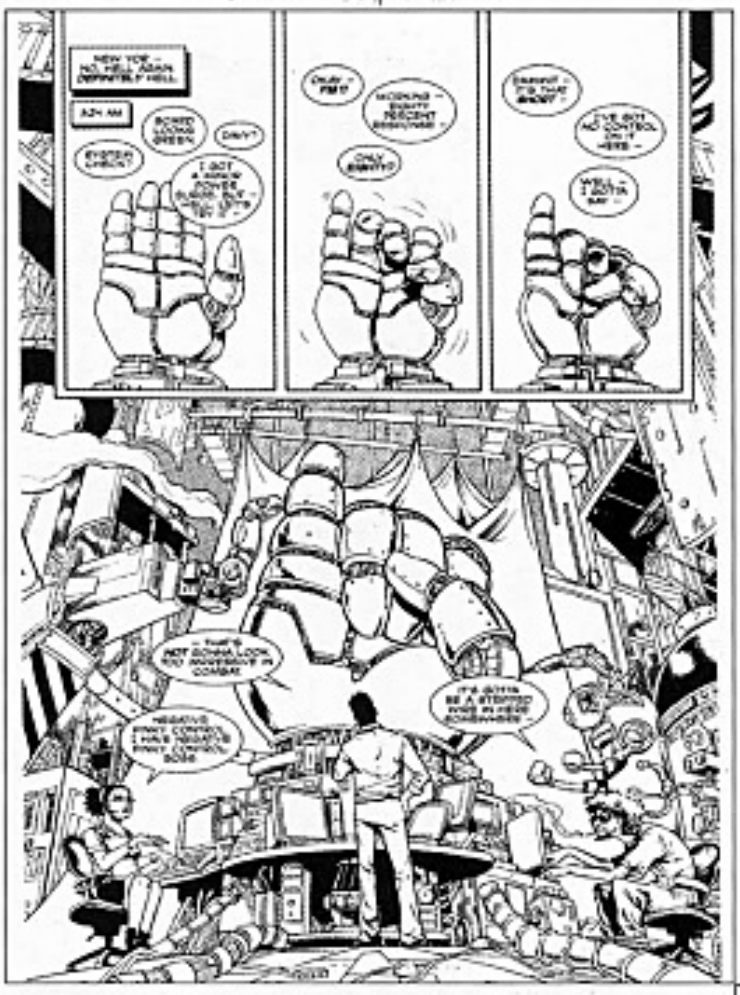
A Thousand Flowers (located at www.newsarama.com) is an appeal to the comics industry not to be so insular. We tend to think of ourselves as the only entertainment field with problems, and to overstate the degree to which TV, magazines, books, movies, and other media are in constant chaos. In reality, our industry problems are similar, but not identical, to those faced by other media.

Along the same lines, comics work best when their content is in synch with the rest of the world. A Thousand Flowers attempts to prove that by quoting lots of fun dialogue from the zillions of comics and books I've got cluttering up my house. Plus, every once in a while, I get all political, which requires more research, but really stirs things up nicely.

V: Quick psychoanalysis time. A fan stops you in the middle of the street, pumps your hand vigorously and says "Mister Moore, I love your work. Particularly *Watchmen*." Do you correct him, take the credit, or beat him to a senseless pulp and leave a signed copy of *Lone* beside his quivering, goo-oozing carcass?

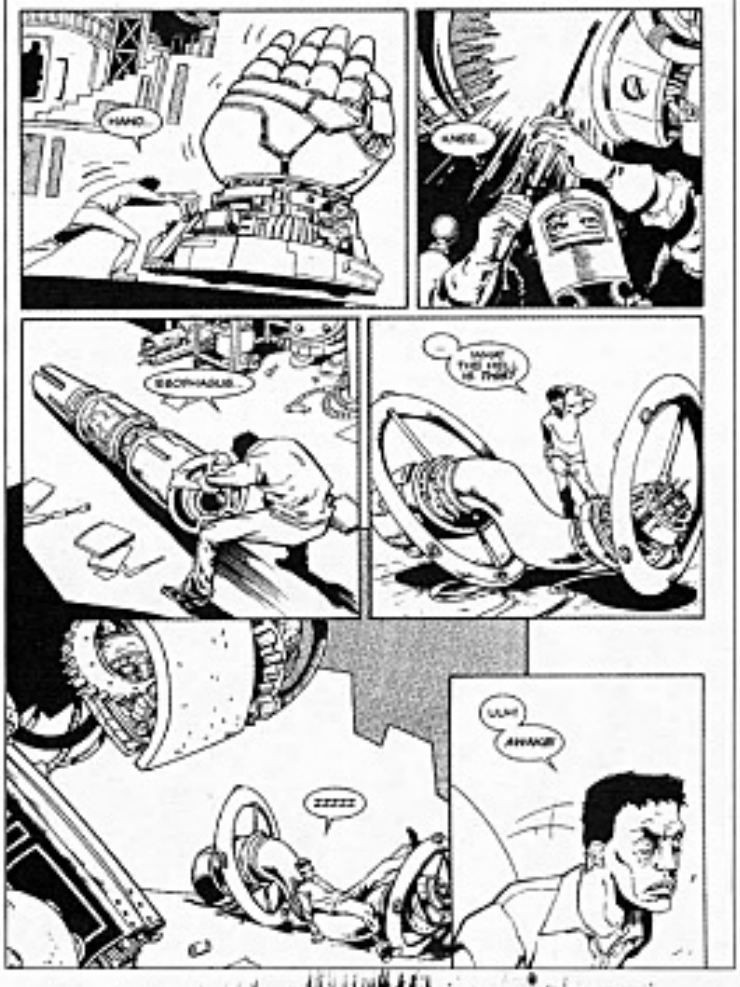
SM: I'd like to do something clever like shake

Zendra © Penny-Farthing Press, Giant Robot Warriors © Steven Moore, Lone © Dark Horse Comics.


NOW YOU - NO HELL AGAIN DEPARTMENT HELL
A24 AM
BOARD LOOKS GREEN
DAVY?
SYSTEM CHECK
I GOT A WEIRD ASS FEELING BUT LET'S GO
DAVY PM?
MORNING - SORRY DIDN'T RECOGNIZE YOU
ONLY SWAYED
THANKS - SO THAT'S BETTER
I'VE GOT NO CONTROL OVER HERE -
WELL - I GOTTA GO!
- THAT'S NOT GONNA LOOK TOO IMPRESSIVE IN COMBAT
NEGATIVE, START CONTROL I HAVE REQUEST START CONTROL NOW
IT'S GOTTA BE A STUPID KID IN HERE SOMEWHERE

I CAN MAKE IT - JUST GIVE ME -
DAVY!
WILL YOU PLEASE JUST SHUT UP!
YOU KNOW THERE'S NO SMOKING IN A SCREENSHOT LAB!
LISTEN DUDE - THIS CO IS TOO YOUNG TO BE SMOKING AWAKE -
WELL - I'LL BE BACK
DAVY - WAIT -
GO HOME -
THERE'S ABOUT FOURTEEN HOURS WORK TO DO - I CAN STAY AWAKE -
YOU BOSS!
I PER-SONALLY - THINK WORK IS VERY IMPORTANT -
IT IS FOR THE AGREEMENT
THE SOFTWARE THEY'RE USING ALL FINE WE'RE GETTING ACCEPTABLE RATES ON THE SIMULATOR CONTROL -
YOU HAVE DONE GREAT - JUST CHECK THE PHYSICS AND SAND THAT SO BUY EARTHER
IF HE TURNS HIM ON AND HE PLAYS THE INTERFACE THE WRONG WAY HE'LL -
JUST BE HERE IF YOU NEED ME OKAY
YOU DON'T WANT TO GO TO CLUB?
NO WAY! I'M GOING TO CLUB!

SLAM!
BOSS!
I'D JUST LIKE A WORD -


HAND
KNEE
BROTHERS
WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?
UUH!
AWAKE
=====

his hand, hand him *Love* or *Giant Robot Warriors*, and say, "Thanks. This one is even better." But I'd probably just correct him and have a good laugh with him about it.

V: I'm sure you've been asked this before, but do you enjoy being a writer now more than being an editor? Do you miss it? Under the right circumstances, could you see yourself on that career path again?

SM: I don't like to rule anything out, but right now, what I'm doing is enormously satisfying. I particularly like the fact that I can write *Justice League Adventures* and then hop over to something of my own, like *Giant Robot Warriors* or the upcoming *Para* miniseries at Penny-Farthing. My role models as a writer are film directors like Steven Soderbergh and John Sayles, who jump around and make very different kinds of films at different times. Alan Moore's very much like that in comics.

Editorial work is satisfying in a whole different way: You get to be involved in a huge number of projects, which is extremely satisfying when, as I was, you can shape a popular, influential imprint like Vertigo or Marvel Knights. (The late science-fiction editor John W. Campbell, who'd started as a writer, said he preferred editing because he got to work on everyone's stories, not just his own.) But ultimately, the work isn't yours to the same degree.

I am currently putting together one large packaging deal where I'll be doing some of the writing and also organizing the entire project. I'm also developing a couple of original comics series where I'm working directly with artists before we have a publisher lined up. I love organizing and putting together comics, and in the computer age, I can do that as easily as a large office can. For now, I'd like to do it with my own work.

V: As an offshoot to that question, what do you enjoy more – working on your own creations, or adding your own special touches to existing characters?

SM: I love both – I love the balance. A book like *Para* or *Giant Robot Warriors* is all mine, and that gives me the chance to craft something from start to finish. But it's also fun to play with Superman, the Flash or Vampirella. Those characters already have a base laid down; you don't have to spend time setting up Vampi's character – you can just dive right in and start writing.

V: Winding up – What's your strangest Comic Con experience? You've gotta have one somewhere in there.

SM: I've got a few I can't talk about. But for sheer strangeness, one thing sticks in my mind from this year's San Diego convention. I was getting up, tired and a little hung over, on Sunday morning and turned on "Meet the Press". Tim Russert was interviewing Paul Bremer, our man in Iraq, and asked him why the United States was shouldering so much of the burden for peacekeeping after the war. Bremer said, "Well, you know what they say – With great power comes great responsibility." There I was, sitting in my room at the biggest comics convention of the year, watching a statesman avoid a question by quoting Spider-Man. Kind of great and kind of depressing, all at once.

V: What book, comic or otherwise, is next to your bed right now?

SM: Let's see: *Captains Outrageous*, by Joe R. Lansdale; *Garden State*, by Rick Moody; and *Krazy Kat: A Mice, A Brick, A Lovely Night*, by George Herriman. And I'm feverishly reading through the collected *Love And Rockets*, which I'd only dipped into before. Amazing stuff. Ⓥ

I THINK IT'S VERY IMPORTANT FOR ART TODAY TO CONFRONT WHAT'S GOING ON AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF THIS COUNTRY.

ART WARRIOR

Known best for his work in the pages of Vertigo's *Lucifer*, artist Ryan Kelly was Stuart Moore's pick to "activate" his *Giant Robot Warriors*.

"I was a little surprised," Kelly admits, "yet, I was eager to take on something serious and big. I really only showed my work to Stuart and [editor] Axel Alonso when they were with Vertigo." Moore saw potential in Ryan, and got him his first professional work – fill-in stories in the pages of *Books of Magic* and *Books of Faerie*. "I took time to improve on storytelling. When [Stuart] left to focus on writing, he said he felt I was the right fit for *Giant Robot Warriors*. If I ever become a Giant-Sized Comic Book Superstar God, it's because of him."

Working on *GRW* was a definite departure from the style Kelly developed for *Lucifer*. "I always believed *Lucifer* should have a lush, textural, decadent look to contrast with the other Vertigo books," Kelly explains. "*Giant Robot Warriors* definitely came out looking very 'dense' I think. The art is really 'hyper-active,' but I think it fits the story."

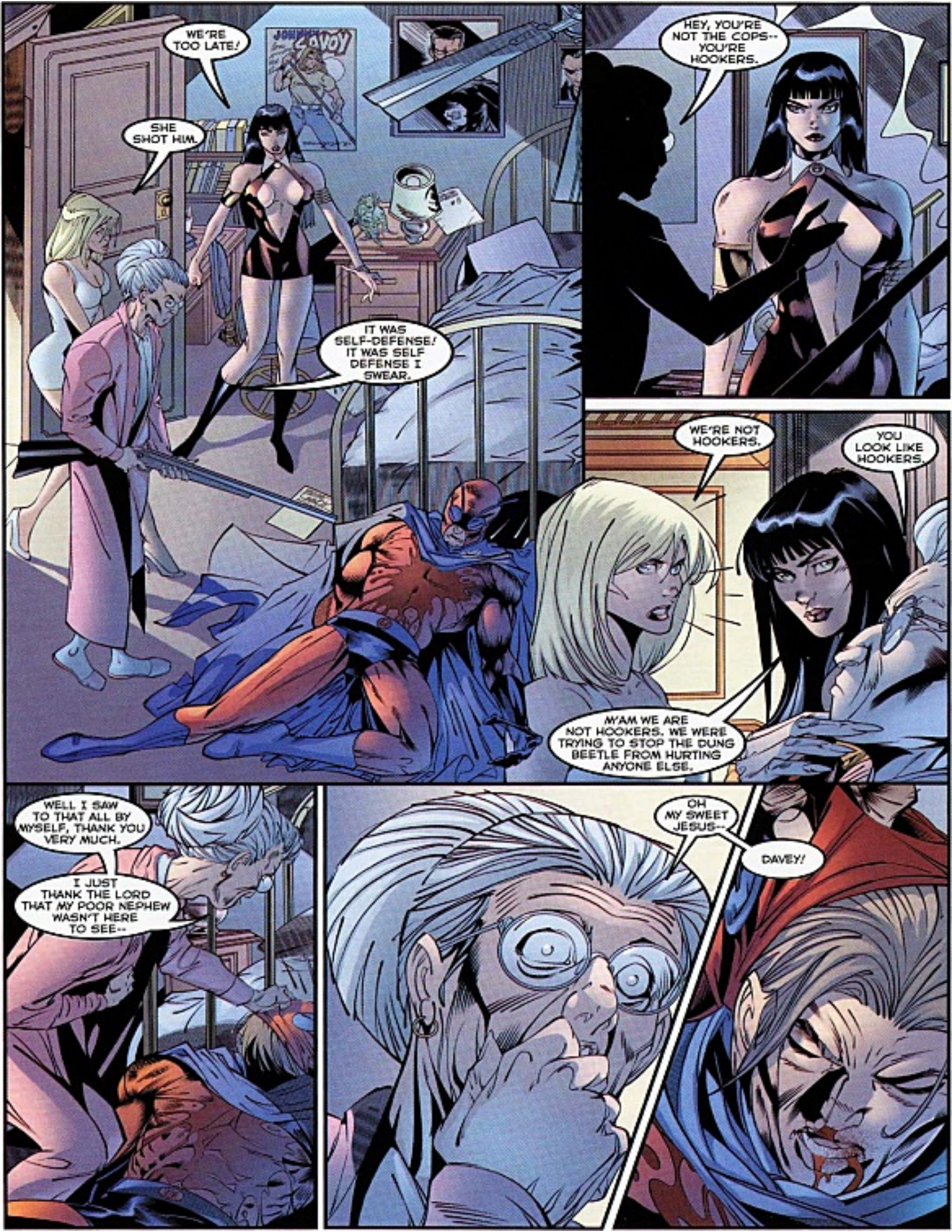
When not drawing devils or robots, Kelly teaches illustration and comic book techniques at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. He's also hard at work at his own book, *Funrama*. "It incorporates pirates and circus freaks in ways you could never imagine. It brings me the most happiness even though about 40 people have seen it." — TL

TINA, HOW FAR DID YOU SAY THE DYNAMIC FORCE BUILDING IS?
COUPLE OF BLOCKS FROM HERE.
I JUST HOPE PROFESSOR RX CAN SOMEHOW MANUFACTURE ENOUGH OF THIS ANTIDOTE IN TIME TO KEEP THE DEFINITIVE INFINITY VIRUS FROM TURNING NEW YORK'S HEROES INTO RABID LUNATICS.
KRRA
BASHH
LIKE THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, ALL YOU REALLY HAVE TO DO IS LOOK UP FROM ANY PART OF THE CITY TO FIND IT.
DAMN! TODAY MUST BE MY LUCKY DAY!
HELLO LADIES, ANY WAY I CAN BE OF SOME ASSISTANCE?

HOLY SH--!
VAMPIRELLA
MUST DIE
part the second of the definitive infinity virus
WRITTEN BY JIMMY PALMIOTTI AND JUSTIN GRAY
PENCILLER GABRIEL REARTE INKER METH
COLORIST RAYMOND LEE LETTERS MICHAEL CONLEY
(Special Thanks to Nick Barrucci)

*$#@** ?
WHAT THE @#%$** YO?
A BROTHA CAN'T EVEN WALK DOWN THE STREET WITHOUT SOME CRAZY ASSED WHITE DUDE JUMPIN OUT OF BUILDINGS, TRYIN TO CUT IN ON HIS ACTION!
I KNOW THE SINGLE SCENE IS BAD, BUT SHIZZLE!
HEY THAT'S THE DUNG BEETLE!
HE'S A MEMBER OF DYNAMIC FORCE!
BUST MY NUTS FOR THIS CITY AND I GET NO RESPECT.
I JUST SAVED THE DAMN UNIVERSE... AGAIN, FOR LIKE THE THOUSANDTH TIME.
SEE WHAT YOU DID, MOTHER@#$%! CAUSE OF YOU, I GOTTA GO PAY FOR IT AGAIN.
BITCH.
I DON'T FEEL-- RIGHT.
MAYBE SOME OF MY AUNT JUNE'S GOOD OLD CHICKEN SOUP CAN HELP ME FEEL--
UGGGHHHH!
WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING?
I'M TWENTY-FIVE! I DON'T HAVE A GIRLFRIEND AND I STILL LIVE WITH MY AUNTIE.
OH GOD, I'M KAFKA'S FRIGGIN NIGHTMARE!

HE WENT IN THERE, LAST APARTMENT ON THE LEFT.
I COUNT SIXTH FLOOR, LET'S GO.
OH DEAR... A BURGLAR, HAS TO BE. DAVEY LEFT FOR WORK OVER AN HOUR AGO. PROBABLY IN THERE STEALING DAVEY'S DARLING ACTION FIGURES.
GET DOWN ON THE FLOOR NOW!
SEEMS DECENT FOLK CAN'T EVEN KNIT A SWEATER FOR THEIR NEPHEW WITHOUT SOME CRIMINAL HELPING HIMSELF TO US HARD WORKING PEOPLE'S THINGS.
COCKROACH-MAN! YOU FILTHY BASTARD! GET OUT OF MY DAVEY'S ROOM!
I'M THE DUNG BEETLE YOU STUPID TWIT!
B-BOOM


WE'RE TOO LATE!
SHE SHOT HIM.
IT WAS SELF-DEFENSE! IT WAS SELF DEFENSE I SWEAR.
HEY, YOU'RE NOT THE COPS-- YOU'RE HOOKERS.
WE'RE NOT HOOKERS.
YOU LOOK LIKE HOOKERS.
M'AM WE ARE NOT HOOKERS. WE WERE TRYING TO STOP THE DUNG BEETLE FROM HURTING ANYONE ELSE.
WELL I SAW TO THAT ALL BY MYSELF, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
I JUST THANK THE LORD THAT MY POOR NEPHEW WASN'T HERE TO SEE--
OH MY SWEET JESUS--
DAVEY!

MY OWN NEPHEW-- POOR DAVEY WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME YOU WERE THE COCKROACH-MAN?
HE WAS SICK. HE HAD THE SPACE RABIES.
LONG STORY SHORT-- HE AND THE DYNAMIC FORCE WENT TO SAVE A PLANET AND CAME BACK WITH A DISEASE. WE WERE TRYING TO GET HIM THE ANTIDOTE IN TIME.
COME ON MA'M, IT'S GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT.
I KILLED HIM!
IT'S NEVER GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT! DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?
Police Radio reports a disturbance at this address. Looks like I beat New York's Finest once again, probably too busy giving out tickets to homeless people for smelling bad.
Note to self: Take down the Mayor and his army of pencil-pushers.
This two-bit tip hustler is probably in on it somehow. I will give him one chance.
WHERE DID THE DISTURBANCE COME FROM?
WHA? I HAVE NO IDEA REALLY-- I JUST CALLED...
WRONG ANSWER.
He was in on it, I could tell.
BRAT-TAT-TAT

WAS THAT AN EXPLOSION?
WHO CARES! WITHOUT DAVEY, I HAVE NOTHING TO LIVE FOR!
YOU DON'T KNOW HOW HAPPY I AM TO HEAR THAT.
BRAT-
TAT
I THOUGHT I SMELLED A HOMICIDE.
LOOKS LIKE SOME RETALIATION IS IN ORDER.
BRAT-
AT-
TAT-
TAT-
TAT
TAT-
TAT
TAT-
TAT
TAT

IS THIS NUTCASE WITH DYNAMIC FORCE?
YES, AND EVEN WITHOUT THE VIRUS HE'S CRAZIER THAN AN INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER.
WOMEN! I HATE WOMEN!
I BET YOU WERE A CHRONIC BED WETTER.

I THINK I'VE HAD ABOUT ENOUGH OF THIS.
TINA! PLUG THAT BACK IN!
EEZ-ZAAT!

ISS'ALL OVER LADIES!
WHILE I CAN SEE ONLY ONE OF YOU IS WEARING PANTIES, I'M AFRAID THE LAW DOESN'T ALLOW ME TO SOCIALIZE WITH CRIMINAL TYPES.
TO BE CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE

So, we recently did a photo shoot together? How'd you describe it?
Paul Stanley: Did indeed. It was full of bumps and grinds.
As any good photo shoot should.
PS: Absolutely.
KISS is presently touring with Aerosmith. How's that been?
PS: The tour's been amazing. To have arguably the two biggest American rock bands of the last 25 years on tour together and sharing the stage is an event really that hasn't happened until now. And the great thing is that it's really not Tyson/Holyfield where you have rivals trying to bite each other's ears off, it's a lot of mutual respect and two bands who go out every night to show both the audience and each other why they lasted this long.
It's a whole lot of reminder nightly that Areosmith is going to be on stage and that we leave our mark and they're thinking the same thing. And we both go out and do our best and it's usually not a night goes by when I don't see some of them on the side when we're on and vice versa.

In the early days, KISS opened for Aerosmith.
PS (laughs): Yeah, that didn't last very long; I think that lasted about three shows. And this is about almost 30 years coming.

Not too many groups can claim a 30 year life as strong as KISS can. You're seemingly immortal.
PS: I think the great thing about the immortality of KISS is it only makes the legend and the mystique that much bigger. You know, the great icons are ones that seem timeless and to transcend age, and KISS has certainly become that, an icon that hits the stage nightly and is virtually identical to what it was 30 years ago.

"THE EXCITEMENT OF IT, THE SEXUALITY OF IT, AND THE SHEER POWER IS SOMETHING OVERWHELMING AND SOMETHING THAT'S INCREDIBLY APPEALING TO ME."

There's also so much more to KISS. You can get a taste in any flavor.
PS: Well, it's important to keep the core and the focus and the foundation of KISS music, that makes it possible for other ancillary interests, but it's great. The difference between KISS and, let's say, other rock bands is that we can have action figures, we can have posters and everything as absurd as a condom and a casket. (With the condom and the casket we figure we get you comin' and goin' [he laughs]). But I try to keep the focus on what we accomplish as opposed to what we are trying to bring to fruition. The thing I'm always leery of, well, there's nothing wrong with striking out when you get up to bat, but you look pretty foolish when every time you get up you point to the bleachers. So far it's been great, it's just a matter of appreciating KISS for what it is, and for how far we can push the envelope.

So, is it the music over the myth?
PS: They're so tied to each other, that I don't know there's any separating the music and the myth at this point. I was making a point a few days ago to somebody that our earlier songs are so indelibly stamped in people's minds not only because of what they represent musically but because of the event that may have coincided in somebody's life. The fact that somebody can tell you what they were doing the first time they heard "Rock and Roll All Nite" or who they were sleeping with when they heard "Beth." And that was born out just yesterday, 'cause a guy stopped me in a Starbucks and said to me "You know, I gotta tell you, the first time I got some action was to 'Love Gun.'" So, the songs are so much bigger than just songs, and so much of the mystique and legend is based upon the impact that we've had on people's lives and it goes way beyond music, it has more to do with how the music impacted those people's existence.

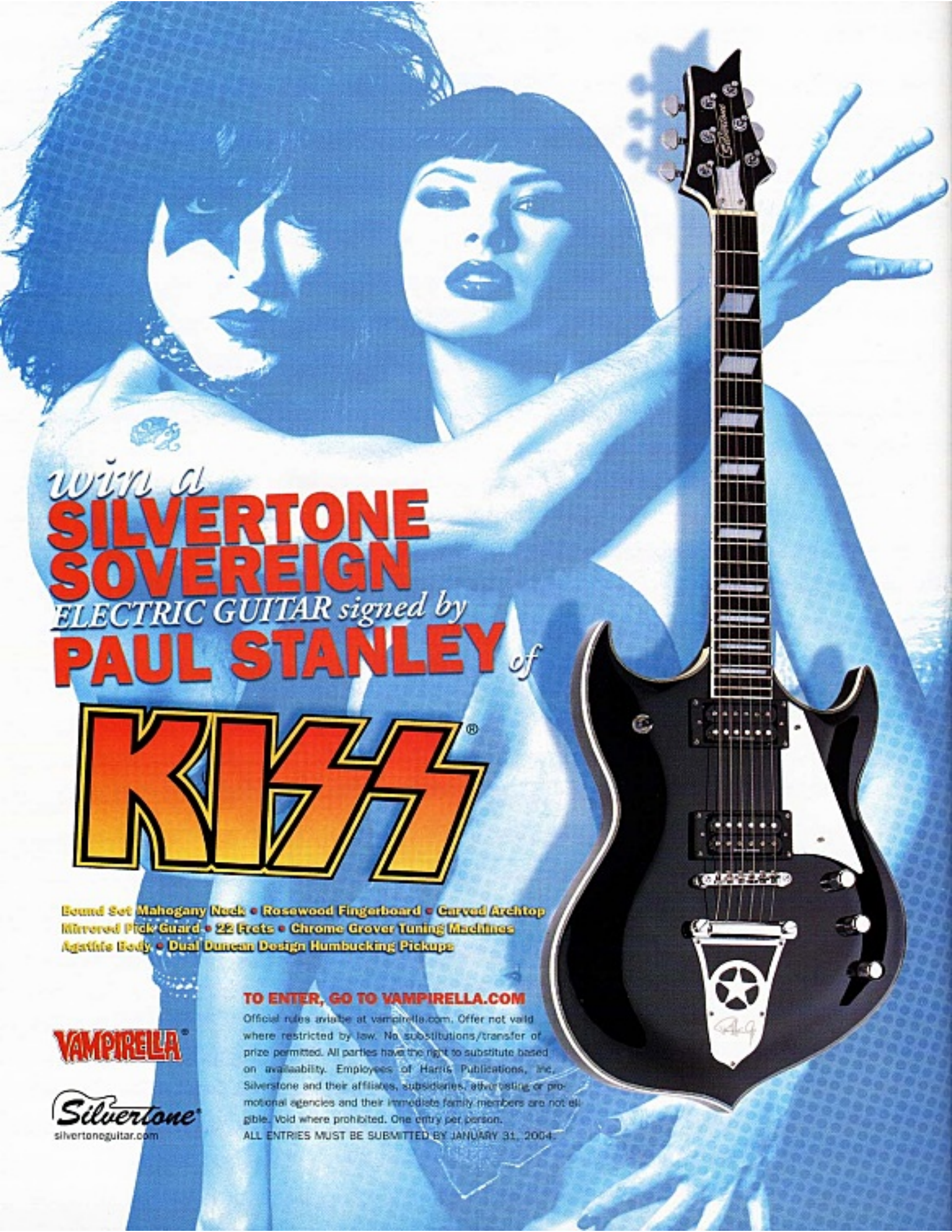
And those people have made KISS a part of their existence.
PS: It's interesting because it's almost four generations. There's a sense sometimes of it being a rite of passage. It's almost as though people want to share with their kids, younger brothers, whoever, what they experienced and to turn them onto something that's every bit as relevant today as it was when they saw it. This isn't about nostalgia, this isn't about an audience of fat people with beer bellies trying to relive their past; this is about great entertainment and escape and there's nothing wrong with the word escape. We have enough bad news in this world and enough trouble that everybody can use a one night ticket to pandemonium.

That pandemonium still reigns, too.
PS: It's astounding, but it's so needed. The fact of the matter is that being a band that last year was in a garage and this year sells five million albums doesn't prepare you to go out and entertain 15,000 people in an arena, Unfortunately, the people who learn that too well are the people who buy the tickets. With KISS, you know exactly what you're gonna get: it's bombast, escapism, blazing music, and a celebration of all that is good in life.

You've always performed with no big messages, just about having a good time.
PS: Yeah, I was singing about me and I am just an average guy and that's why everybody else felt I was singing about them because I am them.
Of course, you didn't always look like them.
PS: Well, you know, that goes back to "You can't always look like KISS, but you can always feel like KISS."
Whatever is part of the ritual for you is fine with me. This is the church of rock and roll, just come and celebrate the almighty power.

In the new biography, KISS Behind the Mask, *you're quoted as saying, "What means the most to me is that I was right. I knew that I was capable of doing something, and even when everybody told me I was wrong, I went against the rules and discovered I was right." And this is "1979 You". Is this still relevant?*
PS: What could be more validating then not only winning but winning time and time again, you know. I've always been leery of people who tell you what's impossible to achieve because I've always felt that the people who tell you what's impossible are the ones who failed and we don't need people around us telling us what's impossible, we need people around us telling us anything is possible because as far as I'm concerned dreams are just blueprints for reality. You just use those, you'll get where you gotta go!
Obstacles are what you see when you lose sight of your goals; don't look at the things that are in your way, look at where you need to get to. Keep moving forward, if anything's in your way, step on it.

And KISS is going to keep moving


win a
SILVERTONE
SOVEREIGN
ELECTRIC GUITAR signed by
PAUL STANLEY of
KISS®
Bound Set Mahogany Neck • Rosewood Fingerboard • Carved Archtop
Mirrored Pick Guard • 22 Frets • Chrome Grover Tuning Machines
Agathis Body • Dual Duncan Design Humbucking Pickups
TO ENTER, GO TO VAMPIRELLA.COM
Official rules aviable at vampirella.com. Offer not valid where restricted by law. No substitutions/transfer of prize permitted. All parties have the right to substitute based on availaability. Employees of Harris Publications, Inc, Silverstone and their affiliates, subsidiaries, advertising or promotional agencies and their immediate family members are not eligible. Void where prohibited. One entry per person.
ALL ENTRIES MUST BE SUBMITTED BY JANUARY 31, 2004.
VAMPIRELLA®
Silvertone®
silvertoneguitar.com

PS: You betcha, there's no end in sight, all bets are off. I'm having a ball, and as long as I can take my shirt off and nobody says put it back on, I'm gonna be out there.

You're also active in the online community, KISSonline.com.
PS: I think it's important to stay reasonably in touch with the people who put you where you are. I never become famous to cut myself off from the people who made me famous. I'm always interested in hearing people's opinions, doesn't mean I'm going to agree, and doesn't mean I'm ultimately going to do what they want, but that again is the freedom of being an individual: if you like what I do, and if you like the fact that I do what I feel I need to then you also have to respect the fact that it may not always coincide with what you want me to do, but you buy the whole enchilada.

KISS has always done what few others would or could do. ALIVE IV is another notch on the belt. What was that experience like?
PS: That was a perfect starting point for putting the band back into action. The idea of KISS teamed up with a 70-piece world-class symphony orchestra was so absurd that it was perfect [he laughs]. It was the kind of challenge that makes life interesting. NO guts, no glory. And that's a perfect example of perhaps being too overly ambitious to commit to something we should have thought twice about. You know, once you commit to something, and we would have in any case, although we had no idea how involved it was gonna be, once you commit to something you better be committed to doing it to your utmost ability.
It was a huge, huge undertaking, and doing it in another country and using trained, schooled musicians who speak *a completely* different language than gutter rats like me, and with a whole lot of determination and a whole lot less rehearsal we did a three act show that showcased the band on its own, and an unplugged segment with the Melbourne symphony ensemble, a 13-piece ensemble, and then the whole onslaught with the orchestra and for one song a thirty-piece children's choir, and 35,000 crazed audience members, and some of those audience members by the way were subscribers to the Melbourne symphony orchestra so those weren't all KISS fans, but in every sense of the word it was the meeting of black tie and black leather. And it was great because the idea was always never to compromise or tone the band down but to teach this orchestra how to rock and get them cranked up. And they rocked and had a great time and it shows on the DVD.

"YOU CAN'T ALWAYS LOOK LIKE KISS, BUT YOU CAN ALWAYS FEEL LIKE KISS."

Even after all these years, does your pulse still pound before you go on stage?
PS: Sure, because the anticipation now is to go out and know that not only am I going to give the fans what they want but I'm going to give them more than they expected. There's not a nervousness there's more an anxiousness because I love being out there and you know, being grateful for what I'm given and the money I make, and the freedom I'm given. I go out there every night to blow people away and so far it's worked. The excitement of it, the sexuality of it, and the sheer power is something overwhelming and something that's incredibly appealing to me and I'm somebody, you know, who is blessed, but that being blessed came with a whole lot of hard work so I'm blessed with the ability to follow through and see things come to fruition and it's not without a whole lot of hard work.
Every drop of sweat is always worth it, hopefully some of it lands on the people who deserve it. Well, it looks better on some. (V)

KISS ™ & © The KISS Catalog. Comics art by Rubi/Friedell/Wooten. Comics art © The Gene Simmons Company

FULL COLOR BLEED

KISS comics have been around since the 1970s when, for the every first issue, the band provided their own blood to be put into the ink.
In every incarnation, KISS comics have proven that they are – and can be – bigger than life.
Within those pages, The Demon, The Starchild, The Celestial and The Beast King routed out evil, stood for something, and were the good guys who might strike terror in the hearts of men, but brought forth much needed light in a dark world.
In Dark Horse Comics recent revival, the quartet was brought back from beyond. The Demon had forgotten his other life, the Starchild had forsaken his earthly realm, the Celestial has left earth to pursue a higher calling, and the Beast King was missing, only to turn up as a brainwashed agent of the Dark Czar. Writer Joe Casey certainly didn't make it an easy journey back to basics. Casey also showed his true fan colors by bringing back the Phantom of the Park. Not the best TV movie you'll ever see, but Phantom of the Park holds a special place in KISS fans' hearts.
In the subsequent arcs, writer Mike Baron picks up the tale and knocks KISS over the edge, relishing in the ability to push the envelop.
The interior page you see above, by artist Mel Rubi, is from "Unholy War," which will be collected in a trade paperback out next February. "Unholy War" introduces The Unholy, who may the KISS's greatest comics foe. They battle this ultimate evil alongside new, younger heroes whom they've taken under their wing. Mr. Speed and Christine 16 (yep, you read that right!) are still learning and growing, and with The Demon, Starchild, Beast King and the Celestial guiding them, these new Army members are in for the ride of their lives.

UNMASKED

THE NEWEST ENTRY INTO THE KISS LIBRARY CONTAINS UNEARTHED GEMS

Many of the stories in *KISS Behind the Mask The Authorized Biography* have been spelled out to long-time fans over the course of the two decades-plus KISS has been together. But many of these stories haven't been told in this form: this book isn't a retrospective, this is them then. This is 1979, after world-wide tours, and problems have come and gone and come again, and heights have been hit and fights fought long and hard, this is KISS before the make-up came off, before the original four split, and way before the original four came back together. This is KISS, raw and young, knowledgeable in what and who they are, the ambition and the desire are still growing when writer David Leaf met them.

They speak of innocence, Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons, something no one equates with KISS. But the innocence of their youth is the one which created songs, one in which they knew nothing of what was expected and did what they wanted.

Of course, they still do what they want. The only thing that could possibly hold them back is themselves, and nothing has stopped them yet. This book is merely a look back on how they got where they are. And it is an in-depth, detailed and honest look at those early years since it was still those early years when they spoke those words.

Naturally, *Behind the Mask* is a must-have for fans. It is an unvarnished look at the history of one of rock's seminal groups. The book's first section is unedited, unvarnished interviews from 1979, on the brink of the demise of their original glory. They were still at the pinnacle, but KISS was slowly falling into the 80s. It 's a fascinating display of hubris, honesty and the honing of skills.

The book is packed with interviews and quotes, from the original four themselves, to collaborators to roadies. The middle section, "Speaking in Tongues," picks up the KISS-story during the non-make-up years up to the reunion of the first four. Co-writer Ken Sharp spent 1996-2000 interviewing the group (in each incarnation), their producers and collaborators, artists and roadies, photographers and consultants and more, including Jim Barbera and Stan Lee, for the Hanna-Barbera Studios produced *KISS Meets the Phantom of the Park* and Lee's Marvel Comics published the first KISS comics.

Interspersed throughout this section are quotes from performers like Brian May, Billy Squier, and Peter Frampton. They are among those who comment on KISS, on their influence, their spectacle, their music, the business. Some, like Bob Segar and Aerosmith's Joe Perry, go into great details about what they saw and see in KISS; some like Peter Framptom and Brian Wilson are quite simple in their statements, but heartfelt.

This section breaks down tour and television appearances, get their feelings on *Phantom of the Park* and the feature film about KISS fans, *Detroit Rock City*.

It's the commentary on business deals that proves to be the topic that appeals to a wider audience than just those who might have held or still hold membership in the KISS Army. Realizing that the KISS stronghold could have been considered a Fortune 500 company in the 70s at the height of their touring and merchandising is revealing, especially in this day and age of pop star companies, cookie cutter performers, and hip-hop moguls.

It's the third section that music historians should flock to. In "Shout it Out Loud," Sharp, recognized as one of the foremost authorities on KISS, compiles a breakdown of each album, song by song, by the people involved, right down to studio musicians. From the early Simmons and Stanley band, Wicked Lester, through Alive!, to the solo albums and non-makeup years, up into 1998's Psycho Circus, "Shout it Out Loud" is a study musical influences, what they thought was best and worst, what the songs mean to each of them, and sometimes, contradict each other.

And that is the appeal of *KISS Behind the Mask:* finding the pieces that don't easily fit into the accustomed puzzle. You know what to expect from KISS, but this is a taste of the unexpected. —MM

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Comics involving their characters immediately becomes their property. While he wouldn't mind working for them ("Don't get me wrong I'd write superhero stories and licensed stories because that's what I grew up on," Kleid says.) there's another kind of energy that infuses this work. Since virtually all comics exhibited at SPX are creator owned, this energy animates the very character of the con and provides its identity. "The attitude is different because here people are more invested in what they do because its theirs," he says. This amount of investment produces comic work of unique scope. Kleid pointed to the highly acclaimed illustrated novel Blankets by Craig Thompson, an autobiographical work nearly 600 pages long. "Like it or hate it, it's something he felt strongly enough to write a 600 page comic about," he says. "And I don't know anyone who's going to draw a 600 page Batman story. This is something that's his. In the end, it's your baby. You can take it home and say, 'I did this for me. I wrote this for me. This is the comic I wanted.'"

"Ah, the mini-comic, the garage band of comics, seemingly as unrefined as punk rock and just as easy to do."

And you hear it again – the heartbeat – faster this time. There's an excitement here missing in most of the rest of the industry, the excitement of people breaking the rules and remaking something they love into something even better. This shared passion and purpose forges an otherwise disparate band of artists into a family of sorts eager to build each other up, dispense advice and together move forward into a bright future.

"Its like a community as opposed to everyone fighting the world," says Raina Telgemeier, creator of the series Takeout. "Instead we have our own world here. You're part of it no matter who you are or what you do."

SPX, along with other conventions such as APE (Alternative Press Expo) in San Francisco and MOCCA (Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art) Festival in New York, serve as the most tangible manifestations of this small press community. If you'd attended any of the larger comic book conventions, such as Comic-Con International in San Diego or the WizardWorld cons in Philadelphia and Chicago, you'd think the small press didn't exist. "The small press presence there is usually relegated to the back room," says Rafer Roberts, creator of the series Plastic Farm. "You have to wander through miles and miles of celebrities and dealers and things that have nothing that have to do with comics in order to get to the good stuff. SPX is all right there in front of you. You can't avoid it."

Except for the larger independent companies such as Top Shelf and Slave Labor Graphics, almost every exhibitor used the same small table to display their work. This uniformity gave SPX a buffet-like feel with no one exhibitor really standing out from the rest. You had to go from one to the other down the line, sampling each one to make sure you didn't miss anything. "There's gems almost everywhere," says Lash. "You should go on your own scavenger hunt." No one was allowed to disappear, everyone was found and creators got their best chance to reach a new audience.

Yet SPX itself hides, as if playing hard to get. Instead of a tourist hub city like San Diego, you have to come to Bethesda, Maryland, a suburb of D.C. out of the way enough you have to actively seek it out. Instead of a large sprawling convention center dominating the landscape, the exhibitors and guests fill the second floor ballrooms and third floor conference spaces of the Bethesda Holiday Inn giving SPX an intimate feel. You won't find Hollywood here like you would at the other cons. No Halle Berry or Angelina Jolie and the overwhelming attention and circus they bring with them. You won't find DC Comics and the 20-foot high Superman and Batman posters that come with it. You won't find any of the major comic companies at all. Indeed, the only superstar is the comic medium itself and nothing else is allowed to outshine it because nothing else is allowed to compete with it.

Listening to small press creators, you get the sense this medium means more than a lot of other things they could value: fame, recognition, even money. "Everyone here's happy just to sell their 50 cent mini-comic," says Kleid.

Raina Telgemeier Takeout

Ah, the mini-comic, the garage band of comics, seemingly as unrefined as punk rock and just as easy to do. You wish everything in life were half as easy. There's no glossy paper reflecting blinding light back at you. No fancy digital coloring. No color at all! All you need is paper, pen and a stapler and you've got all you need.

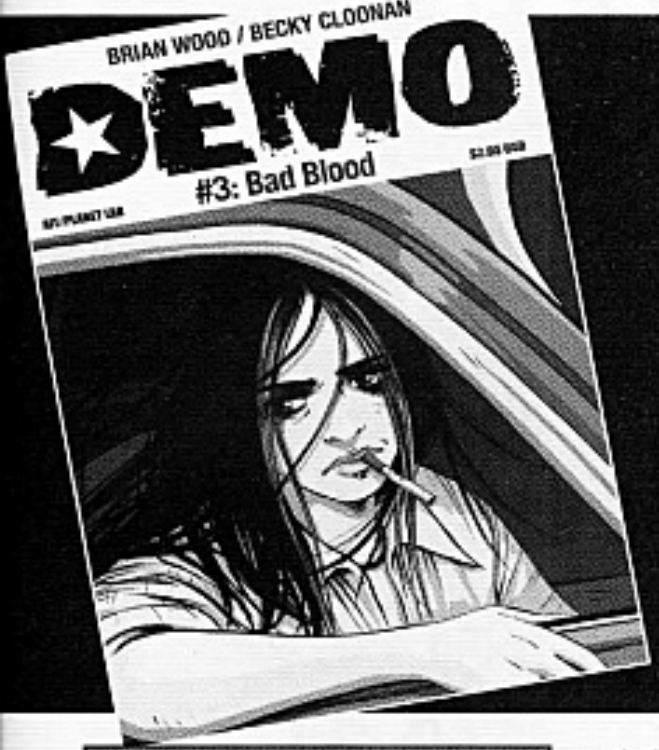
"I go to Kinko's and copy my work and staple it together and you have a mini-comic. All will be sold for 25 or 50 cents each," says Telgemeier of virtually everything available at her table, "and that's good because people are willing to take a chance on a book that's cheap and it's a good way to get a lot of books into a lot of people's hands. And if they like it, they come back for more."

You hold one of them in your hands – and it can be small enough to fit into the palm of one -- and it seems like a newborn, so raw and fragile, so full of potential and life. The work, the passion, the excitement of the small press – it's all there for two bits. You see possibility: you, yes, you could do this too! The magic barrier between you and the industry vanishes and you can envision yourself years from now counted among the legends: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Alan Moore, Frank Miller.

There are those whose artistic skills aren't as refined and polished as most of the others at SPX. They come, tempted by the ease of fulfilling their dreams with the mini-comic, the way garage bands can see themselves paving a road to fame with just three chords. Any potential lack of talent, they'll make up for with a surplus of determination for they've got something to prove. They'll sit there for the marathon-like three days of SPX wondering why, even here, people ignore their work, something they love so much. You'll pass by one and you'll lock eyes with him for a half second and even if you're the five hundredth person who's tried to ignore him, he won't let you go so easily. Next thing you know, he tells you about how he handmade the covers of each copy himself, about the personal story contained within. The way he talks it's as if you're the only one who's ever bothered to listen and you're afraid to break his heart.

So, you buy one of his mini-comics – a dollar doesn't hurt – and as you move on, you remember the cover's one of a kind, made in the middle of the night by restless hands driven by something you're just beginning to understand. It seems so strange and alien to you, you who are so accustomed to the big-budget, blockbuster productions of Marvel and DC. But those weren't made for you – not like this was. Holding it in your hand, you know that even if it ends up buried under the massive pile of other mini's you'll bring back from this place, it won't matter to him because you'll have read it and for at least one moment something that was his became yours. You're holding a piece of him, a piece of him that beats. As you move on that beat seems to come from all around – from every comic on display, from the lips of every person here, from everywhere and everything – you hear that beat enveloping you now like only thunder can –

S! P! X!



DEMO

Writer: Brian Wood
Artist: Becky Cloonan
AIT/Planet Lar (www.ait-planetlar.com)

Demo is a gripping and melancholic collection that strips away the glamour of having superpowers, leaving only the burden and isolation.

Each issue tells a self-contained tale of one rejected and frightened teenager, whose remarkable powers have made them not a hero, but a pariah. As they come to terms with their freakishness, the effects of their abilities are demonstrated and they are always destructive. One of the most striking things about this series is that, unlike the X-Men for example, the teens don't have anywhere to turn. There is no one to mentor them and cultivate their abilities for a greater purpose: they are outcasts, and dangerous ones. There's nothing at all "super" about this existence, though each story thus far ends with a twist that brings a glimmer of hope to their lives.

Perhaps the most tragic story is Emmy's, featured in the second installment. Emmy's ability is to make her verbalized wishes into reality, and her anger and insecurity makes it impossible for her to control this, resulting in a great deal of death and destruction. The most heartbreaking imagery in the series thus far sees Emmy's confronting the empty shell that is her mother, an unfortunate early recipient of the girl's "talent."

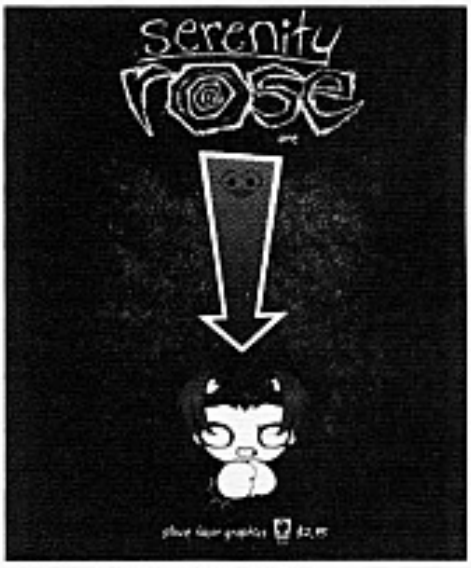
Cloonan's art complements Wood's writing perfectly: the images are stark and claustrophobic, and each of the teenagers distinctly rendered and characterized. Their stories take place in or around cars, as they run from a past where they are shunned towards a future that is just as uncertain and terrifying. —JC

SEAMONSTERS & SUPERHEROES

Writer/Artist: Scott Mills
Slave Labor Graphics (www.slavelabor.com)

Scott Mills has garnered a reputation for producing some of the most diverse graphic novels in comics. His acclaimed *Trenches* dealt with two brothers at the bloody frontlines of WWI. *My Own Little Empire* examined life in small town America. In his latest, the anthology series *Seamonsters and Superheroes*, Mills pulls out all the tools from his tool box touching on the real and fantastic, the absurd and the profound in a collection of short comics, most no longer than a page.

That's perhaps the weakness of the series for all his topics seem to lack the depth he reached in his graphic novels. For those unfamiliar with Mills' work, though, the series serves as a thorough sampler and introduction: there's a sea beast who claims "It's not easy being a monster"; a superhero zipping seemingly through heaven and hell to get to a bathroom; and an alien preaching to humans to take "responsibility for your life and your actions and quit acting like you don't matter." The one universal in the stories is his unique art style, self-described as loose and organic. Combined with a glowing sense of humor and ceaseless wonder of the universe's many foibles, Mills work radiates a warmth rare in an increasingly cynical industry. His is a much needed voice, if only to keep everyone guessing what he's going to do next. —BA



SERENITY ROSE

Writer/Artist: Aaron Alexovich
Slave Labor Graphics (www.slavelabor.com)

Written and drawn by Aaron Alexovich, *Serenity Rose* is another great addition to the SLG family. Although not as dark as *Lenore* (Roman Dirge) or *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* (Jhonen Vasquez) or as laugh out loud as *Bear* (Jamie Smart), *Serenity Rose* is still within the same vein of moody and spooky humor.

Welcome to America's number one spooky tourist attraction, the town of Crestfallen as told from the personal journals of jaded college student and local witch, Serenity Rose. Drawn with a gritty pencil style that totally reflects the character Serenity's mood, the art really completes the story and makes this a fun book to read. —DK

DIAL M FOR MONSTER

Writer: Steve Niles
Artist: Various
IDW Publishing (www.idwpublishing.com)

Cal McDonald is the kind of guy who would catch a girl's eye in a bar. Then, he'd wonder what the hell a girl's eye was doing flying across the room at him.

Steve Niles' down and dirty private eye drinks too much, throws up, pops pills, laughs at the doctor who tells him to drink milk to help his ulcer and then proceeds to drink the milk, chased by whiskey. He then goes out and hunts a murderer who's been stitching girls' bodies back together. That's after he's been tossed around by a human soul given substance. And

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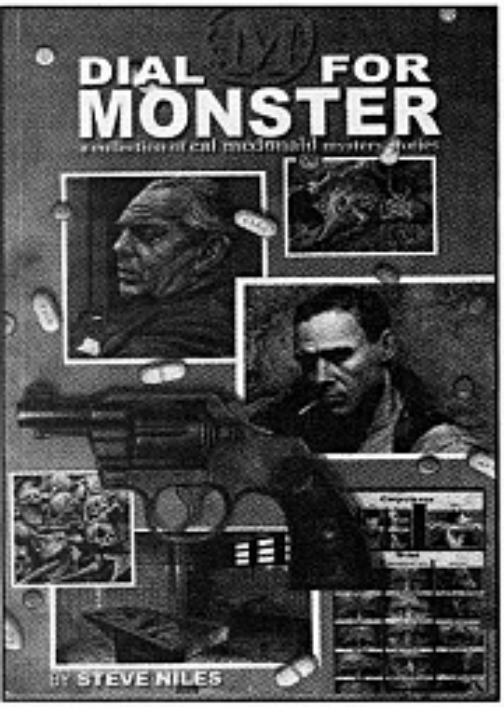


that's before he meets up with a Nazi werewolf. And Bigfoot — he meets, well, a few of them.

Coming off of his other McDonald novels– *Savage Membrane* and *Guns, Drugs, and Monsters* – Niles infests the readers with the private eye's world, his addictions, his skills, his friendship with the ghoul Mo'Lock and his ability to get out of the strangest jams. McDonald isn't like any of the detectives you've seen before, and he's a hell of a lot more fun. —MM

WONDERFUL DAYS

Tin House
www.tinhouse.co.kr
www.wonderfuldays.co.kr

Finally, Korea has an animation to call its own and Oh, my! what a beauty it is. *Wonderful Days* is the stunning debut from Tin House, an animation studio that has specialized in mostly commercials and music videos. With a 15 million dollar budget Wonderful Days is the most expensive animated film in Korean history. Directed by the multi-award winner Moon Saeng Kim, *Wonderful Days* is, simply put, one of the most amazing animations to come out this year with an almost flawless blend of computer graphics and traditional animation. With artwork that is comparable with *Final Fantasy: Spirits Within*, *Wonderful Days* is a showstopper.

That said, the only flaw, of course, is the story. Like many of the great "all animation" movies, the plot of *Wonderful Days* seems to have been built up around the almost gratuitously stunning animation, which totally neglects the people of its world and leaves the audience feeling detached. The story is very predictable as it revolves solely upon the love triangle between the main characters. But even with all its flaws, *Wonderful Days* is a masterpiece giving us a taste of what's to come from Korean animation. — DK

LAST EXILE

Gonzo Studios
www.jvcmusic.co.jp/m-serve/last-exile/

From beginning till its very end, *Last Exile* is one of the finest anime series of recent memory. But that's not surprising because it's Gonzo Studios' (*Hellsing*, *Full Metal Panic!*) 10th anniversary project and no time, money or talent has been spared in making this one of the best series that they've ever put out.

Directed by Koichi Chigira (*Gatekeepers*), *Last Exile* displays top notch animation with beautiful CG scenes. What's great about *Last Exile* is that the story is very unpredictable. From one episode to the next you have no idea what is going to happen. Don't get me wrong, you still have an idea of what's going on, but just no idea as to how, which is refreshing. From the very first moment *Last Exile* sucks you inwith loads of great action and is pure adventure to the very last. *Last Exile* is one of the best anime series to come out in a long time, so be patient and keep an eye out for it, as it's scheduled to hit U.S. shores within the next year. — DK

CHRONOS

Lion's Gate Films/October Films
www.lionsgatefilms.com

One DVD perk is finding a lost gem by some Hollywood talent, some movie that you might have never heard of but you get to grab in its next life. And it is a next life that writer/director Guillermo Del Toro explores in the 10th Anniversary Special Edition of *Chronos*.

An expressive tale of eternal life and sacrifice and greed, Chronos will probably give viewers a greater insight into what the upcoming *Hellboy* movie may be like, including seeing star Ron Perlman, sans prosthetics.

An ancient device finds its way into a shopkeeper's hands and the mysterious mechanism is unlocked. Of course, someone else wants the machine, someone who has heard that it grants immortality. And as anyone familiar with such tales knows immortality isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Del Toro lurks in the shadows of filmmaking, taking dark tales and making them accessible. Known in the US more for *Blade 2* than *Mimic*, Del Toro has become one of those hot international commodities that Hollywood loves to hitch its cart to. But in *Chronos*, there is a purity in the story, from the mix of Spanish and English, to the little girl who says nothing, to the desire and need to feed on blood. There is a reason why this film won nine Mexican Academy Awards and won Best Picture in Cannes during International Critics Week, and that reason viewers will discover as the story unfolds and they learn that time is not a toy to be played with. —MM

NEW BLOOD

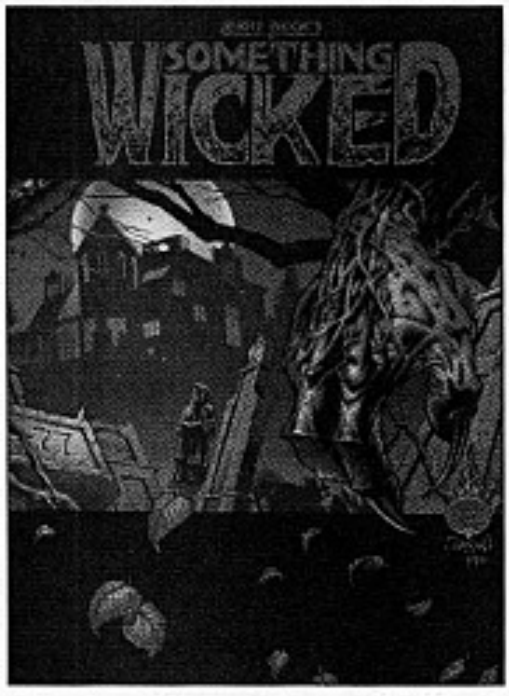
TAKE A BITE INTO SOME OF THE NEWEST COMICS OFFERINGS

What is "New Blood"? In this case, it means Fresh Meat: getting the low-down on the talent that's making a stand and a sacrifice or two for their art. These are the new kids, with new projects, who have clawed their way into the clubhouse and aren't leaving until their voices are heard. And they're screaming.

Within these pages, our industrious writers Jim Catapano, Patrick Keller and your humble E-I-C open them up and let the fresh meat cook, burning and boiling, pushing their wares and getting the word out.

JERRY BECK

The idea of *Something Wicked* makes some people fearful, others tremble with joy, depending on their demeanor. This *Wicked* outing is lead by Jerry Beck, the creator (writer and artist) of the bi-monthly comic. The detailed work



comes from old school influences like "Warren Publications, where I saw most of the art that sparked my desire to draw. Jose Ortiz, Leopold Sanchez, Bernie Wrightson, these are magnificent illustrators that, in my opinion, never got the recognition they deserve. More recent influences would be, without question, Dale Keown, Tim Vigil and Todd McFarlane."

Beck's take on horror stems from reality, citing the documentary *Bowling for Columbine* as focusing on a very real horror that we can't get away from. In that way, reality seeps into his fictional world of death and disease. "The book is very real," Beck says. "The situations are not so far fetched that you can't relate. It's the not too distant future. The world we live in is dying. Man's obsession with playing God through science has finally caught up with him."

To play God in his own world, though, takes skill and lots of ink. Beck notes, "I think what stands out as my strongest point in my art is use of lighting to create depth and contrast: black, white & grays are my world. I'm very colorblind. That said, I've always told myself that any art that leaves my desk needs to be as complete as possible because I am not coloring them." —PK

BECKY CLOONAN

When we last encountered Becky Cloonan, she and writer Brian Wood had brought us the internationally acclaimed *Channel Zero: Jennie One*. Now she and Wood are back with *Demo*, Cloonan's first-ever monthly book. It's a milestone for the artist, who is known in the industry for being remarkably prolific.

"For a while I never really thought about it," admits Cloonan. "A lot of my friends work quickly too so I just thought it was normal until people started pointing it out. A lot of times I take on too many projects at once, and I don't like flaking out so I have to work hard to keep up with all the deadlines. When I do go through a slump I have so many deadlines that I just force myself to draw through it until I get motivated again. I just love drawing comics so much that finding inspiration isn't hard when I really love what I'm doing."

The installments of *Demo* each showcase one scared teenager coming to grips with their unwanted and highly destructive powers. One of these is Emmy, who can make things come true

with her words, with often horrific consequences. Like her counterparts, Emmy is not looked on as a hero, but an outcast to be feared.

"Out of the first three issues, number two ["Emmy"] seems to hit home the most," says Cloonan. "There is something about this story that is just heartbreaking."

The teens inhabiting the frightening world of *Demo* are distinctive and vividly realized, an achievement that stems from a combination of Wood's characterization and Cloonan's thoughtful and personal visual style.

"I always pull inspiration from my friends and people I know," she says. "For Emmy, I drew her sort of as I remember looking when I was a young kid. If Brian has an idea of what the character looks like, he'll write a loose description, but for the most part I make it all up. Sometimes it takes a while to develop them, and some I whip up on the first sketch."

Demo is planned as a 12-issue maxi-series and Cloonan will be taking a greater role in the construction of the later installments.

"Brian and I have some great stories coming up. He's let me think of plots for some of the issues, which is awesome. *Demo* is such a joint effort, I think that's one of the things that makes this comic work."

Each issue of *Demo* tells a self-contained story and whether the characters will ever meet and compare notes remains uncertain.

"I'm not sure if the stories will ever connect, it's possible, but so far each issue stands on its own."

In the meantime, Cloonan's got her hands full, as usual. "I've been working on a 200 page graphic novel since I finished *Jennie One*, after *Demo* I'll probably start some serious work on that. I also have some other short series planned with some friends, hopefully I'll have time for it all! Brian is the best writer I've worked with so far.

"There's no doubt in my mind that we will continue to work together after *Demo* wraps up." —JC

JUSTIN GRAY

After a stint in Marvel Knights editorial, Justin Gray took to the pen on his own. Slowly, he's made his way into comics writing, some on his own, some with the prolific Jimmy Palmiotti. But solo or teamed, Gray spins interesting tales that might seem standard, but are far from it. One of those projects is *Mr. Keen*, a reworking of the traditional detective story that Gray describes as "something of a surrealistic nightmare with gunfights, pimps, Santeria, a cowboy dwarf in a birdcage, cannibalism...you know, wholesome family fun. I was left entirely alone for the project and allowed to wander down what

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ever demented path the story took. Oh and it's mature, I like that aspect. I love noir, the shady and desperate side of life. I like offbeat characters, sex and violence, so left to my own devices I came up with exactly that."

Gray's plate is just about full these days with the aforementioned *Mr. Keen*, two projects (including the fan-favorite *21 Down*) from

Wildstorm, *Monolith* ("An enormously powerful creature created from the very streets he protects, and is the living embodiment of the greatest city in the world, New York.") for DC Comics, an orignal graphic novel for Image, his own contribution to Vampirella lore in this magazine, and a novel and screenplay, but he isn't sitting contently by as they wrap up. "I'm working on several projects that I'm extremely happy about. I'd like the opportunity to keep telling the types of stories that interest me; I enjoy having the chance to create new characters and new books. There are some existing characters that I'd like to work on, not because they're icons, but because I have stories for them." —MM

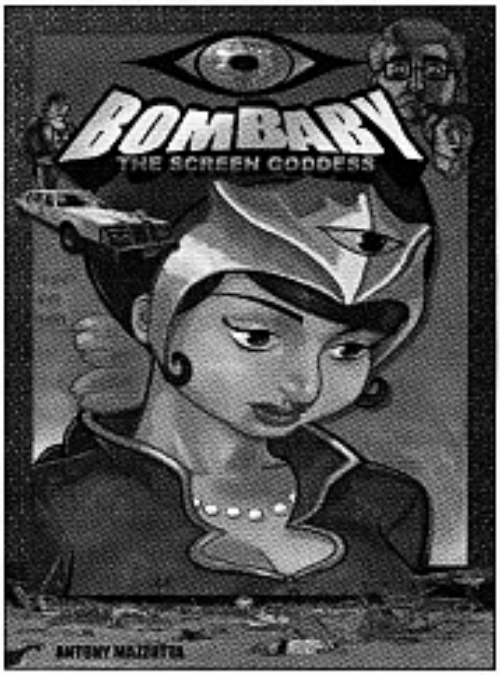
ANTONY MAZZOTTA

Bollywood's all the buzz in Hollywood and afar, and it was only a matter of time when it would infiltrate comics. But more than infiltrate, this first work by writer/artist Antony Mazzotta should inspire other creators as much as he shows how extremely lush the medium can be.

The soul of Mazzotta's *Bombaby* comes from just about everything around him. "Many things inspire my work. God, family, friends, nature, and animals are examples of some of the major influences in my life. I think that *Bombaby* is best described as a result of where my life has taken me."

The 24-page, full-color, four-issue miniseries "is the story of a young heroine on a journey of self-discovery. In the series, we are introduced to *Bombaby*, and witness her first steps towards becoming an independent person," notes Mazzotta.

But the main character becomes more than just an independent person. The creator explains, Sangeeta Mukherjee "learns that she is the reincarnation of an ancient Goddess, who has sworn to protect India, and her beloved city of Bombay." This doesn't come easily, either, as



Sangeeta finds her meditation takes her into the midst of fights and robberies that her mere presence stops.

Mazzotta, who grew up on the US east coast but headed out West, and has worked in commercial animation and video games, turned to comics for a specific reason. "*Bombaby* is a visual story, which lends itself to comics. I also believe that the comics medium is a great creative outlet, which offers freedom and energy to both artist and viewer." —MM

B. CLAY MOORE

If you haven't caught *Hawaiian Dick* yet, you're in luck: the original miniseries is collected as a trade, and the new series, *The Last Resort*, is coming out now. But for a comics story, *Hawaiian Dick* is pretty unusual. Writer and co-creator B. Clay Moore describes it as "*The Rockford Files* meets the *X-Files* in a *film noir* version of 50's Hawaii." We call it "Tropical Noir."

The "we" in this case is Moore and Australian artist Steve Griffin who Moore gathered after an internet search. "I had originally been working with another artist on developing the book, but when his schedule became too hectic, I started looking for someone new to the industry, who might make a bit of a splash. I found Steven through the Internet, and after asking him to work up some color samples, I fell in love with his style and his astonishing potential. We just clicked from there."

The story – about a mainland ex-cop who moves to the islands to start his life anew – can be seen as a traditional crime noir story, but there is much more to it, including a supernatural bent. And they don't just balance, notes Moore. The mix comes, quite frankly, "by combining them to some extent, I suppose. Girl takes a bullet in the forehead... girl wakes up as a zombie. Grit meets horror in four colors. We look at the supernatural element as something that crops up now and then to further complicate matters. Ghostly stumbling blocks designed to redirect cases that didn't seem all that complicated to begin with."

The ghost marchers, ancient warriors haunting the islands, Caribbean voodoo in a Pacific setting — this and more quirks fill the pages of what could simply be a detective story, and makes it better.

As for what's next, Moore is realistic but enthusiastic about the project and his partner. "As for the future, the two of us are going to finish the follow-up to the first series, and then do a couple of short stories together. Whether we do more *Hawaiian Dick* after that is up in the air right now, but I do want to work with him again regardless." —PK

LUNACHICKS

WHEN THE MOON IS FULL THEY RISE

Since the early days of Vampirella, many women have gone out of their way to portray the bloody vixen. At conventions, on Halloween, for photo shoots, for the Hell of it – it's been done time and again, with and without the prodding of others.
Every month, you can meet one of these women who take their fandom to the next level. If you know of one, share. Send all packages to:

LUNACHICKS
Vampirella Comics Magazine
1115 Broadway 8th floor
New York, NY 10010

OK, so Kitana Baker's our regular girl. But we know you like her and we know you wanna know more.
So, besides www.kitanabaker.com, you can get your fix right here. This month, we're playing favorites with our lovely Miss Kitana. A list of her favorites, that is. And now your favorite vampire vixen sits backs and let's us all into a little corner of her life.

FAVORITE MOVIE: You're going to hate me for being so girly with this answer, but I'd have to say The Princess Bride (Even I want to go throw up now!)
FAVORITE TV SHOW: Will & Grace
FAVORITE PART YOU'VE PLAYED: The Miller Lite Cat Fight Girl
FAVORITE PLACE TO RELAX: The comfort of my own home
FAVORITE PLACE TO VISIT: Sweden
FAVORITE FOOD: Chocolate
FAVORITE COLOR: Blue
FAVORITE ANIMAL: Cats, they're very independent
FAVORITE SPORT TO PLAY: Competition Swimming
FAVORITE SPORT TO WATCH: Live, I like hockey. On TV, I like football.
FAVORITE ACTOR/ACTRESS: Angelina Jolie
FAVORITE BOOK: Hmmm, does Playboy's Book of Lingerie count?
FAVORITE COMPUTER: I own a Dell for a desktop and Compaq for a laptop.
FAVORITE MONSTER: I have had a fear of Freddy Krueger since I was a child, and to this day still can't watch any of the Nightmare movies!
FAVORITE SCARY STORY: Did I not tell you I don't like being scared. OK, let me tell you how easy is it is to scare me. After I watched the movie Scream, I couldn't be alone for a week!
FAVORITE WAY TO GET SCARED: There's none! Although I'll torture myself and watch a scary movie every once in a while, but I can't be alone.

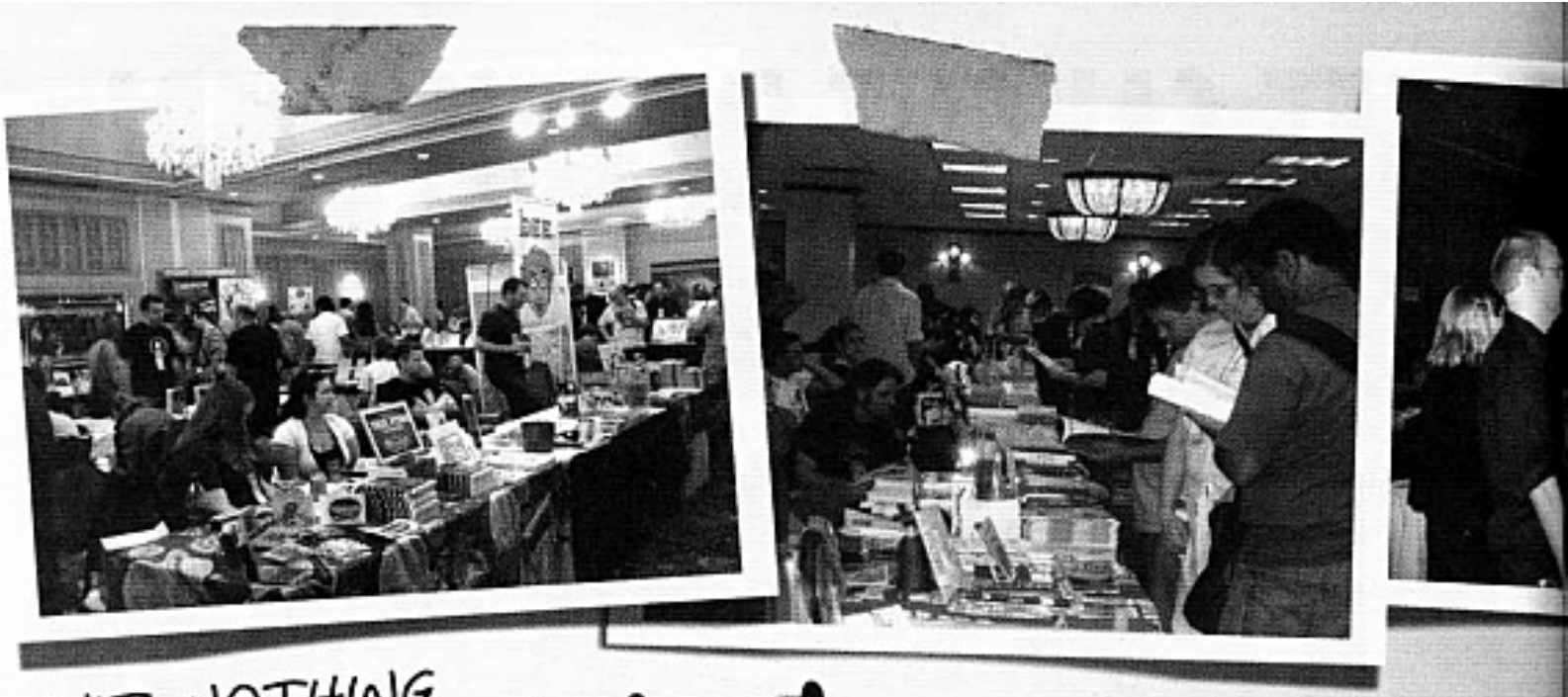
PHOTO CREDITS: Stephen Stickler & Jennifer Sullivan

KISS & TELL

WITH STARS IN HER EYES, VAMPIRELLA SITS BACK WITH THE STARCHILD HIMSELF, KISS FRONT MAN PAUL STANLEY, AND BLOWS KISSES TO ONE OF ROCK 'N' ROLL'S MOST IMMORTAL GROUPS.

INTERVIEW BY *VAMPIRELLA* (WITH MAUREEN MCTIGUE) **PHOTOS BY STEPHEN STICKLER**

I guess I wasn't expecting such a calming, soothing voice to come over the wires. When you see KISS, live in concert or in any other form, there is this bombastic presence in front of you, you can't escape it, you're absorbed by it. But when Paul Stanley speaks, he speaks calmly, and comfortingly, he's a man in control, and yet he's the guy next door. But he is the Starchild, there's no doubt about it. With a confident "If you feel it's good for you, it's good for me," Paul Stanley confirms it.



AIN'T NOTHING SMALL ABOUT SMALL PRESS!

By Bon Alimagno Photos By Daniel Kang

A TRIP IS TAKEN. BOOKS ARE BOUGHT, AND REVELATIONS ARE MADE.

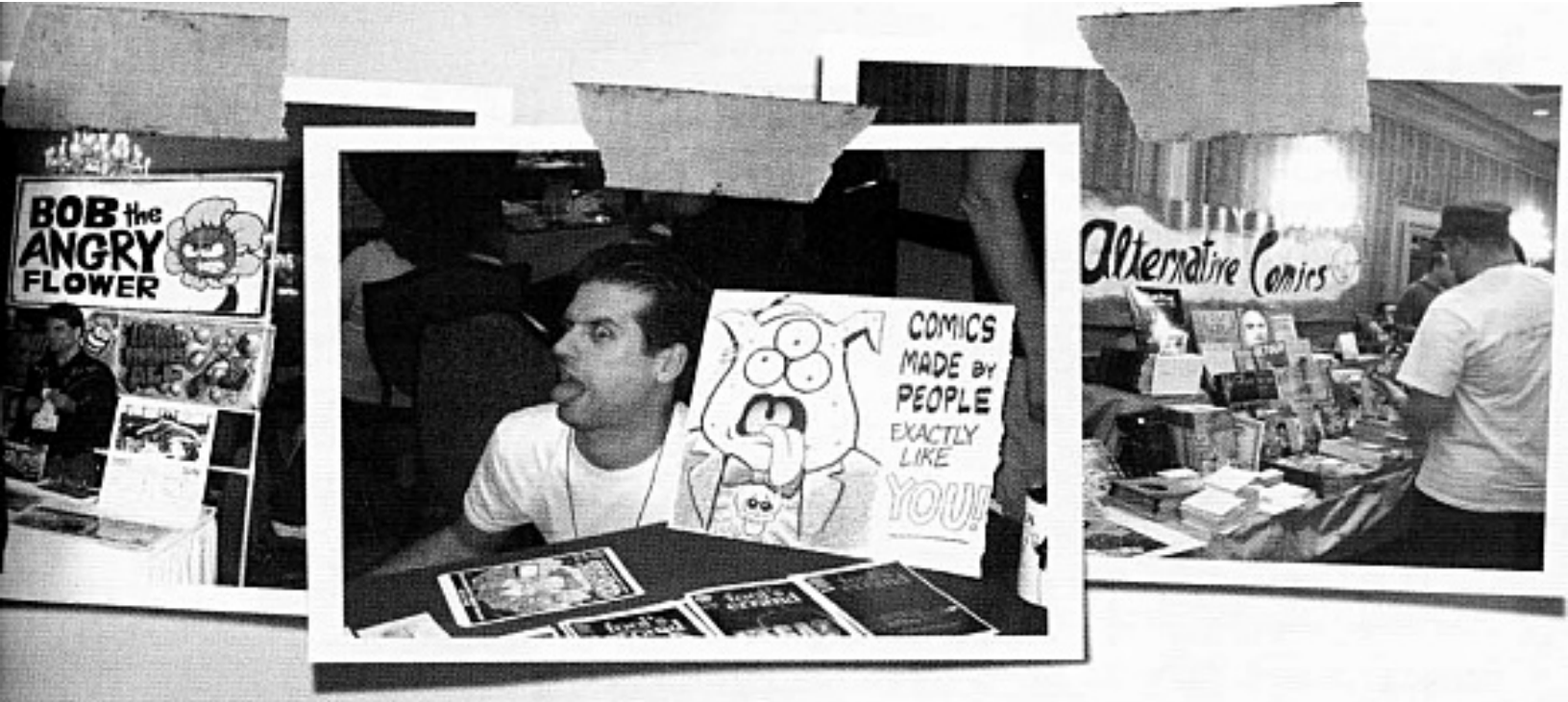
There are many givens in entertainment. The bigger the names, the bigger the story. The even-numbered Star Trek movies are better. Stephen King's books will sell. As will Anne Rice's. Harry Potter's a given. And comic books are all about superheroes. Or so you're lead to believe. Much like the rest of the entertainment industry, the comic book segment has its share of blockbusters and independents. And like it's filmic older brother, independent comics are where the breakthroughs are made, where the new talent cuts their teeth. And while the Batman and the X-Men rake in the bigger bucks, the heart and soul of the medium can be found in the smaller corners, literally in the small press. One of those corners is SPX. You hear it and you don't know what to make of it. It sounds dangerous and odd and a little cool, too. Then you hear that it's a comic book convention. A comic book convention! Never mind, you say. You know what those are all about and you want no part of them. That's where the crazy people go to be with other crazy people! They don masks and capes and garish costumes there and run up and down the aisles, all too eager to get their picture taken, all too eager to speak Klingon or Elvish or whatever other tongues they've concocted amongst themselves. Ah, but you're not listening. Do you hear it? SPX. The way the letters seem to roll into each other, propelling you onward with a hop (S!), a skip (P!) and a jump (X!). Are you sure you want to dismiss this so quickly, something that could redefine your definition of the comic book and reawaken a love of it you thought had died with growing up. Listen again, even harder this time. You hear that, now? It's a beat – S! P! X! – a heartbeat. And so, in a quiet, unassuming suburb of Washington D.C., one cool weekend in early September, the most vital heartbeat in a bastard medium found a loving home.

Mark Burrier: The Pitch

SPX stands for Small Press eXpo. Doesn't sound so dangerous anymore, right? Nothing too scary can have "small" in its name. Those who count themselves members of the small press segment of the greater comic book industry wear the label as a badge of pride. The large comic companies, DC Comics and Marvel Comics and a few others known primarily for their long running superhero franchises, provide narrow breathing room for any comic creators unattached to them, leaving just 10 percent of the overall market. Yet these creators produce some of the most compelling, worthwhile material available. The catch is you have to find them, often times racked in the backs of your local comic book store or so mixed in with the other stuff it's like finding the proverbial needle in the haystack.

So what would you find? Certainly not what you might be accustomed to seeing: not comics about gods come to earth in spandex and capes gallivanting about the sky. Instead you'd encounter more down-to-earth stories on a wide array of topics: having your first baby, overcoming grief, bad sex, great diner food, missing your subway train, finding true love, losing everything, getting a second chance, going home, never coming back. While critics don't dispute that books and music and movies can tackle these subjects, the same people sound amazed when they discover comics capable of tackling them as well.

"I think the indies and alternatives have far more mainstream appeal than what's called



'mainstream' in comics," says Batton Lash, creator of the long running small press series Supernatural Law. "In the comics industry the jargon is mainstream comics are superhero comics and it only appeals to a niche crowds."

Here he speaks of the state of the comics industry, a medium seemingly dedicated to producing material consumers aren't ever meant to relate to: escapist superhero fare and the like. While not a bad thing, it's, as he says, a niche, a small subset within the infinite range of subjects comics could, if not should, be dealing with. Anyone looking for variety is forced to look elsewhere, away from comics. The only ones left have been savagely stereotyped as "geeks", "nerds" and "fanboys," incapable of relating to the real world, unable to get a date Saturday night. Yet they are really nothing more than what he gleefully identifies them as, not fans but something else, something new: "They're older, more intellectual – READERS! People coming here, they want comics. People are looking for something to sink their teeth into: good characters, a compelling story. It's comics for the rest of us. 'Where do I go for something for me?'"

"There's the perception that comics fans and comics creators are one particular type," says Paul Sloboda of Fools Gold Press. "I don't think so though. I think everyone brings their own specific experiences and specific insights to the comics. So that's why it's so neat to read small press comics because you get a really individualized expression. It's just the kind of story I would like to tell. Marvel and DC put out stuff for the superhero fan, the sci-fi fan. I can't relate to it. They're writing really contrived, flashy stuff for movies. How much can you identify with it?"

A maturing and aging fan base realizing they could no longer identify with their favorite characters began abandoning comics in huge numbers during the mid-nineties. While mature storytelling aimed at a more adult audience had already broken through in the mid-80s with Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' Watchmen and Frank Miller's Dark Knight Returns, it wasn't until the 90s when the major companies realized it would be fatal not to aim their comics toward adults. The problem was, for the most part, the adults who still went to comic book shops were superhero comic fans who couldn't bring themselves to read anything else. The spandex and cape genre was thus forced to shoulder a mature storytelling style and subject matter it was never built to handle. Relying on this audience that aged and thus grew out of comics led to a shrinking industry and the closure of hundreds of comics shops across the country. Sales figures shrunk accordingly, too. Where once in the early 90s the number one ranked comic on the sales charts sold in excess of a million copies a month, now the heads of the major comic companies would be throwing a parade if the number one book sold a fifth of that. Superman, the first superhero comic book character, can be safely called one of the best-known characters in the world. Yet each of the character's four comic series sells about [30,000 to 40,000] copies a month, a figure bested by the circulation of many small town newspapers. These signs serve as troubling evidence of the weakening interest in the superhero genre.

> "...one cool weekend in early September, the most vital heartbeat in a bastard medium found a loving home."

Dara Sonnikone: The Light is Much too Bright

The smaller companies and independent creators found at SPX don't own any superhero characters to begin with and so usually don't bother trying to publish any. Instead they put their effort behind the projects that grow the industry beyond the boundaries everyone seems trapped in. It's not a case of being revolutionary. Instead, it's what the industry needs to do to find new audiences and to grow and survive. Comic readers need to find works readers can actually identify with.

Neil Kleid knows all about producing works such as these. Kleid's put out a number of autobiographical strips and pieces in his Rant Comics series. While they chronicle his own experiences, he crafts them with an unflinching eye for true experience, so true anyone can relate them to their own lives. For instance, a piece on his moving from Detroit to New York echoes the experiences of anyone who isn't satisfied with their current situation and feels some irresistible need to escape to a better place. Such a personal story is made possible because it is his.

Any story he'd write for Marvel or DC